

## **TEACHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

Jelena Kosanović, Dragan Soleša,  
Dragan Savić, and Ivan Jerković  
University of Novi Sad, Teacher Training Faculty in Sombor,  
Serbia

### **1. A short outline of the school system in the Republic of Serbia**

Present school system in the Republic of Serbia is complex and heterogeneous representing one of the basic components of the society. From pre-school institutions to university, about 20% of the population is directly involved in the present school system, which means that 1.4 million of people participate directly in the formal school system. About 5.5% of the total number of workers in the country are employed in educational system. Together with scientists and research workers, 120,000 teachers and professors make the most educated population of this country and, at the same time, they represent the base for development of human potentials of those who are to become the leading powers of economic change and recovery of the country, bringing changes to the whole society.

About four million citizens of Serbia are in direct need of education. This number includes both young generation enrolled in the existing formal school system, and adults without basic education and adequate professional qualifications, unemployed who need prequalification, and those employed who require some kind of further education such as innovations, additional training and similar.

At present, in the Republic of Serbia, the formal school system is the only functional system of education. This system consists of pre-school education (for children up to 7 years of age), compulsory primary education (for children from 7 to 15 years of age), secondary education (for young people from 15 to 18 or 19 years of age) and tertiary education (higher and university education). In addition, the existing system includes the following sub-systems: art and music education (primary, secondary and tertiary), special education (for all categories of children with special needs) and education of minorities.

The existing system of education lacks some important components of informal education, such as adult education, permanent education, education for media, distance education, education in local communities, family education and so on. The role

of education is understood very narrowly, thus education system has been reduced to school system, which is incapable of meeting different educational needs of various categories of people, such as:

- Adults without primary education;
- Adults with primary education, but without adequate professional training;
- Employed who need permanent education;
- Unemployed qualified adults who need additional training or prequalification;
- Some ethnic groups;
- Gifted children and similar.

The existing educational system is incomplete and, as such, it endangers human right to education for members of different social groups. Such a system is not capable of coping with full economic, social, and cultural needs of the country.

Moreover, the network of schools and faculties is unevenly distributed. This is very much obvious in primary school system, where more than 50% of schools have less than 50 pupils. On the other hand, there are some huge, overcrowded schools in big towns (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš) with 90 – 100 classes with 1,300 to 2,500 pupils in them. In addition, standards of infrastructure and educational equipment are usually very low in most primary and secondary schools. The following data support this thesis:

- More than 50% of schools require complete renovation;
- More than 25% of schools lack appropriate sewage system, more than 50% do not have appropriate water supplies, 56% of schools are without a telephone line, and almost 25% of schools have heating problems;
- Less than one third of all primary and secondary schools have a library; with the exception of a very few ones, most school libraries have inadequate literature;
- Most of school equipment is aged and useless, over 30 or 40 years old;
- 230 of primary school pupils have access to only one computer, while in secondary schools this proportion is one computer for 64 students;
- Some 20% of secondary schools have access to Internet, although very few have an undisturbed access.

In the Republic of Serbia, there are two types of institutions for education and training of teachers for primary schools. These are:

1. Teacher training faculties (six faculties). They are a part of the University and train teachers for class-teaching in lower grades of primary school (first four grades).
2. Different departments within faculties (e.g. faculty of natural sciences and mathematics, faculty of letters and humanities, philology, etc.), specialize in teacher education and training for subject teaching within the expert fields of their study.

Teacher training faculties are the only institutions in Serbia which educate and train primary school class-teachers. Teachers who have graduated from Teacher training faculties teach all subjects from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, with the exception of foreign languages (if introduced in lower grades), informatics, art and music, which are taught by special subject teachers.

Teacher training faculties are young academic institutions. They started their work in 1993. Previously, teachers were educated in Educational Academies which were not a part of the University, and their studies lasted two years. There are six teacher-training faculties in the Republic of Serbia with over 3,000 students (1.81% of the whole student population in Serbia). Most of the students are girls (90%). Teacher training faculties have extended departments intended for training teachers who teach in primary schools in different minority languages, such as Hungarian, Slovakian, Rumanian, and Ruthenian language. Undergraduate studies last four years (8 semesters). Average length of study takes 5 or 6 years, which is less than average duration of studies in the Republic (7 years). Between 200 and 300 students per year graduate from the teacher training faculties. However, teachers with two years of higher school training still work in schools all over Serbia. If they wish, they can continue their studies at teacher training faculties.

Subject teachers who work in primary and secondary schools acquire their education in relevant study groups within faculty of natural sciences and mathematics, faculty of letters and humanities, faculty of philology, physical education faculty, as well as in music, art and applied art faculties. These are often called “teaching faculties”, although this is not quite true considering the ratio of theoretical and practical training instruction they offer.

There are seven state universities in Serbia with 14 teaching faculties. Within each university, there are separate departments for training different profiles of teachers (three faculties of letters and humanities with seven different study groups; three faculties of natural sciences and mathematics with six different departments; two philology faculties with 12 teaching groups, two faculties for physical education, three art academies and two higher schools of art). They all have about 30,000 students (18% of the whole students population), and each year about 2,000 of students graduate from these faculties. Undergraduate studies last four years (8 semesters).

These faculties have satisfactory capacities for education of necessary number of teachers in Serbia. However, the quality of education should be raised and improved.

## **2. Description of teacher education system**

### **a) Teacher education for different levels of schooling**

Education of teachers at the university level was preceded by a long tradition with different forms of institutional organizing. In Vojvodina, this education began as early as in 18<sup>th</sup> century (1778). It was introduced as part of the reforms of enlightened abso-

lutism carried out by Maria Theresia throughout the empire. Schools were confessional, and for the first time people needed some qualification in order to teach. This school started as a three months course, and in years to come, it changed into 15 months course, then into two-year school named "Royal Pedagogy of Illyrian People", then into three-year and four-year normal school (Preparandija), after that into five-year teacher training school, and finally into Teacher Education Academy with two programmes: primary teachers and pre-primary teachers.

The first teacher training school in Vojvodina, the popular Norma, was a course held in normal schools in regional school centers. The major subject was instructional methodology with specific instructions for teachers regarding their lives and school-work in order to make their pupils good Christians and good citizens. In other parts of the country education of teachers started almost hundred years later.

After The Education Academy Law was passed in 1973 in Serbia, several education academies were founded. The duration of the study became six years of which first four were taken at the secondary school level and the remaining two at the level of higher education. These academies existed for twenty years preparing teachers for work in primary and in pre-primary schools at the level of higher education.

In 1993, the authorities decided to close down these institutions, and to found new academies for the training of pre-primary school teachers in duration of two years, as well as teacher training faculties for primary school teachers in duration of four years. These institutions are still operating presently.

## **b) Programs for teacher education**

Teacher training faculties create their own programs independently. However, these programs have to be approved by the Academic Council of the Faculty. As for higher schools, which educate pre-primary school teachers, they define and coordinate their programs within the Association of their schools.

With the exception of changes in specialized subjects (chemistry, mathematics, biology, geography, etc.), the pedagogical concept of teacher education has not significantly improved for the last 30 years. The programs of the faculties, which have departments for education of teachers for upper-primary and secondary level of schooling, usually include so-called pedagogical subjects: pedagogy, pedagogical psychology, and instructional methodology of the subject. However, there is no universal agreement on the scope and content of the pedagogical subjects. Some faculties even miss pedagogy and psychology; some have only one of these subjects, while all do have instructional methodology. Also, there is no universal agreement on the instructional methodology and its place in the study program. Some faculties organize practical classes in schools, while some do not. Some treat this course as more theoretical than practical. The reason for different concepts lies in independent individual programs of each faculty.

Actual program (curriculum) of higher schools for training of pre-primary teachers includes four basic categories of subjects: general education subjects, professional subjects, practicum, and pedagogical practical training.

A detailed analysis of these programs shows that psychology of pre-school children dominates, followed by children's literature, general pedagogy, and physical development.

Instructional methodology of specialized disciplines is studied in the third and fourth semester with three lectures per week for each.

Practicum is evenly distributed throughout all semesters.

All students must have two weeks of practical training work in pre-primary institutions during the third semester, and three weeks at the end of their study. This means that future pre-primary teachers have only five weeks of experience during their professional education.

Experts agree that this problem could be solved by extension of the study by two more years. This concept of a four-year university level of education has been widely discussed.

There are six teacher-training faculties, which differ in the programs of their study. Teacher training faculty in Sombor has introduced certain changes, both in compulsory and in optional subjects, as well as in integral parts of the curricula. Other faculties have done the same. All faculties have been busy preparing new programs. What preceded the founding of these faculties, was certainly not a detailed expert analysis of faults and defects of previous teacher academies, nor a thorough reform of this teacher education segment. Here, we have in mind the future reform of primary school and the reform of the complete system of education in general. Thus, education of future teachers stays in disharmony with the planned changes and with contemporary needs of children. We could say that in some aspects this education is rather anarchic.

Despite the differences, current programs consist of 44.65% of general education subjects, and 55.65% of professional pedagogical subjects. When compared to the programs of previous academies, this program has changed in favor of professional subjects.

In the first two years, the compulsory subjects are mainly Serbian language and literature, didactics, pedagogical psychology, foreign language, developmental psychology, general pedagogy, mass communications, educational sociology, philosophy and ethics, information technologies, sociology, and social ecology.

In the third and fourth year, students mostly study and learn instructional methodologies of subjects taught in lower grades of primary school. Total number of lessons in instructional methodology of Serbian language is 225, in mathematics and nature and society study is 165, while instructional methodologies of music, art, and physical education have 105 lessons.

At this level, students have courses in school and family pedagogy, children's literature, methodology of educational research, teaching technology, and work with children with special needs, and Constitution with school legislation.

In the beginning, the compulsory part of the curriculum of the faculties included the so-called interdisciplinary seminars, viewed as correlation mechanisms between

pedagogical subjects. We expected that the seminars would encourage students to participate in discussions regarding theoretical and practical problems of education. Nevertheless, they turned out to be nothing more than theoretical lectures. As a result, most faculties have abandoned them or have been trying to replace them with better solutions.

The curriculum includes optional or elective subjects as well. These subjects are school hygiene, history of civilization, history of education, film and TV, family sociology, rhetorics, adult education. At some faculties, teaching technology is optional too.

Practical training of students is divided into two segments. Individual work (real class teaching) in primary schools follows this schedule: one week in the first and in the second year, two weeks in the third year, and one month in the end of the fourth year of study.

Students can choose where to complete their practical work, but they are obliged to bring the certificate after the completion of their work. The certificates are issued by primary schools.

The analysis of the curriculum, subject contents, and practical training indicate that teacher education rests on traditional pedagogical doctrine. Theoretical lectures dominate, students do not have enough practice, and instructional methods are still conservative. Young, future teachers learn to work with children mainly by observing experienced teachers at work. Very often, they do not teach independently, but with elder teachers' help, or they just observe. It could be said that they try to imitate the traditional teaching models. In addition, teachers who accept students are not trained or educated for this kind of work. This represents a great default of the system.

Practical training of teachers at all levels follows the "imitating" model. Yet, practice should encourage students to take a more creative approach to instructional work. It should develop a critical view towards offered models and it should help students to find new, creative solutions to pedagogical problems. All this would result in specially designed activities applied in specific situations and adjusted to children's needs.

In addition, undergraduate studies at teaching faculties are academic and research oriented. The only difference between educational and non-educational departments is very often a minimal number of courses in psychology, pedagogy, and teaching methodology.

Special Regulation Acts issued by the Ministry of Education and Sport regulate types of professional education for teachers and associates at each educational level, their contents, and teacher certification. Although different, these regulation acts have very much in common.

### **c) Teacher education legislation**

Any person who has finished a four-year secondary education (high school) can enroll in the first year of the Teacher Training Faculty. In order to enroll, applicants must meet special requirements regarding the language of the study, which means that they

are expected to master either Serbian or one of the minority languages. Under-graduate students who study in a language of a minority can transfer into under-graduate studies in Serbian language, providing that they prove their knowledge of the Serbian language.

Each applicant has to pass the entrance examination, which consists of general knowledge and information, Serbian or minority language, and examination of skills and inclinations. The final rank list of candidates is based on their average grades in secondary school and the results of the entrance examination. A student who achieves an average mark 8.5 in the first two years of study has the right to finish his studies earlier than prescribed four study years time (accelerated studies). At the end, students have a final examination in the field of educational sciences. A student who has passed all required examinations according to the plan and program of undergraduate studies of the Faculty is conferred a university degree and a professional title of a class-teaching professor.

Graduated teachers who work in schools have to pass a professional examination. Upon his/her consent, a school makes application on behalf of the candidate to the Teacher Training Faculty, at least 30 days before the examination. The Teaching Board of the Faculty forms an examining panel. It has two members, experts in relevant educational fields. A teacher-candidate has to pass two oral examinations: Constitution and educational legislation, and instructional methodology of a particular educational field he/she chooses. However, a teacher has to pass a practical examination in instructional methodology too. It includes a lesson preparation in writing, and a practical teaching in class.

The examining panel examines and evaluates the procedures and methods as well as the answers of the candidate in oral examination. In practical examination, it evaluates and grades the candidate's knowledge of pedagogy, psychology, and instructional methodology, as well as his/her ability to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice.

### **3. Problems and controversies and the future of teacher education**

One of the major changes, introduced by the information society is a constant, permanent need of teachers to acquire fresh information and knowledge, and to improve and refresh old concepts, which very quickly become outdated and useless due to accelerating development of technology. More important becomes the urge for learning new creative methods, techniques, and tools, as well as for storing and using of information and knowledge. These are of existential importance for each teacher, and at the same time, they represent the essential condition for full participation in information society.

The existing type of school in our country does not measure up to scientific, technical, and technological revolution, which cannot be avoided. The school itself is deteriorating within, despite strong bonds exercised by the hierarchy of authority structures. Once an omniscient teacher, he is no longer interesting because of his bor-

ing instructions. Students expect him to teach them how to use information and communication technologies, how to understand and communicate with persons on distant continents, how to exchange concepts and ideas in order to make friends, and cooperate. In order to be appropriately prepared for life in contemporary society, students should be trained to transfer complex ideas, to solve complex problems and to cope with different vague situations. They should also know how to think abstractly and how to make conclusions. Teaching should be exciting, to provoke students' natural intellectual eagerness and to help students gain fresh information.

As we know, each change, even towards better, is a threat to old balance and naturally, provokes resisting reaction. Thus great reforms, such as educational reform in the republic of Serbia, although it is synonymous with "better", need not necessarily mean an achieved goal. The reforms can hide certain risks, as well as certain advantages, which we should always keep in mind. Existential status of our teachers is threatening to endanger their aptitude to carry out the reforms. Therefore, the major part of the education budget is intended for teachers' salaries, leaving reform activities rest on international donations. Inadequate equipment of schools is another risk factor in carrying out reforms of educational system. Solutions depend on donations and foreign help too. Third risk lies in the fact that there are no instant positive effects of change, they show themselves only after a certain period of time. Due to a lack of immediate satisfaction of participants, this slow-coming evidence of results could deflect their enthusiasm and thus endanger the process of reforms. Another problem is within the area of competence of all interest groups included in the decentralization of education. The competence includes knowledge and skills of all participants, especially those of local administration, which will have a more active role in the future.

Proposed changes regarding education and professional development of teachers (pre-school and primary school teachers) refer to their progressive professional development. In Serbia, three main phases of this process have been discussed: initial professional education i.e. pre-service, (learning the profession - training period), in-service and professional improvement, and on-service. Proposals rest on recorded contemporary educational problems and on teachers' further education, as well as on the series of goals which should determine both directions and pace of proposed changes.

The initial proposals for education begin with the concept that future teachers should be prepared to accept their complex roles in passing generative and applicable knowledge and skills in teaching children. Besides general instructions for the basic education of all teachers, these proposals include recommendations concerning two specific action projects:

- Altering and changing of teacher training curricula;
- Establishing a system of practice-schools within education academies and teacher training faculties.

Several expert teams have been founded in teacher training faculties. Among other things, they have proposed compulsory probation work as the structural component of teachers' professional development. In years to come, when financial and institutional

situation improves, we expect that the Ministry will accept two specific action projects:

- Organization and normative regulation of probation work system;
- Training of mentors, who will supervise the probation work.

These suggestions mean that a reformed program of in-service development starts with a strategic preparation of all teachers for conducting a complex teaching role. Other forms of training should be either compulsory or elective. Compulsory training program should rest on priority goals of professional development. The whole in-service training system rests on the school as a basic user and on co-ordinating regional centers for further professional improvement of teachers. Professional improvement could be carried out through school teams, teachers' associations, teachers' networks based on specific training programs, and on distance education. This segment follows action projects approved by the Ministry of Education and Sport:

- Strategic preparation of teachers for a new, complex role in teaching as a part of the reforms;
- Founding of regional centers for professional improvement of teachers;
- Research work and analysis of actual training program network and trained teachers.

In addition, the expert team on teacher education and further teacher training also proposes a National council for education, and a National center for professional development of teachers. This expert team discusses strategic dilemmas which will open in the future. Therefore, they are willing to include other experts and interest groups in the discussion. Some of the questions are:

- Whether pre-school teachers should be educated on university level and/or should teacher training faculties and pre-school teacher academies be integrated .
- The second dilemma concerns the possible ways of solving the problem of the lack of professional pedagogical skills in both subject teaching and in professional education. The team has suggested that a specialized and authorized institution (or agency) should be founded in order to gather experienced university teachers who would hold courses for final year students, or for graduated students who wish to undertake teaching. Yet, the dilemma still exists, since no final answers could be offered to this question.
- The following open question regards the possibility of more effective selection of students who would become teachers. The crucial questions are how to identify relevant indicators and instruments which could predict efficiency in teaching, and how to attract and enroll best candidates, regardless of poor material and social status of teachers.
- How to equip school principals with adequate knowledge in order to become school managers, and similar.

### **Ways of reform changes in teacher education system**

Comprehensive professional study subjects should be constructed as applied scientific disciplines, whose contents and interaction should focus on future addressees. It is necessary to :

- Lay stress on the block of psychological-pedagogical subjects, which prepare students to mediate generative and practically applicable knowledge and skills;
- Introduce an extensive course in evaluation of the quality of instructional process (both students and teachers);
- Introduce systems of cross-curricular and other elective study subjects;
- Equalize the quality of different instructional methodologies;
- Introduce seminars for studying basic methodology fields;
- Develop, within methodologies, a sense and willingness for integrative approach in teaching;
- Prepare and train students for research work in instruction;
- Introduce a course in communication, team work, and in establishing constructive relations with all structural factors in the teaching process (including parents);
- Train students how to use new educational technologies.

Working methods: more interactive methods, individual students' work (projects), work with different sources of knowledge, permanent mentor/advisor work with students during their studies.

Practicum: more appropriate practical training connected with theory in various fields. Introducing new models in practicum (e.g. practicum as the whole project work, from introducing the problem, looking for sources of information, collecting material, to making sense of final results).

Practice-schools: both, schools for pre-primary school teachers and teacher training faculties must have permanent practice-schools for various forms of student practice. They should be equipped according to the faculty standards, and they must have an appropriate number of qualified teachers – mentors. It would help if those schools were financed from the same budget as high schools, at least for those activities regarding planning and practical realization of students' work.

Teaching staff: There is a great need for renewal of teaching staff in schools for pre-primary teachers, as well as in teacher training faculties. It is essential to ensure continual further improvement of teachers and to reanimate old practice of professional teachers' exchange, of visiting lecturers at home and abroad. However, we think that students' evaluation of teachers would help to raise the quality of teaching, too.

Multi-level and elective instruction: We should discuss the possibility of multiple qualification system (primary + upper-primary teacher; teacher of more than one sub-

ject – group of subjects). It would be necessary to make more sense in specialization, post-graduate, and doctoral studies.

However, in our opinion, adequate school legislation (statute changes, curricula changes, changes in evaluation procedures, and in teaching staff promotion) and required financial support should follow all suggested changes.

Within the teacher education system, we have been actively engaged in realization of a project supported by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Finnish Educational Council, Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Serbia, and two teacher training faculties in Belgrade and Sombor. The project should offer changes in teacher education curricula at both faculties, which should be implemented in October 2002 and successively changed every following year accordingly. The changes should be followed by both internal and external evaluation for each year of study, and in the end, a final evaluation of the complete pilot project should be realized.

**Contact addresses:** e- mail addresses: [ucf@ravangrad.net](mailto:ucf@ravangrad.net); [dsolesa@eunet.yu](mailto:dsolesa@eunet.yu); [jerkovso@eunet.yu](mailto:jerkovso@eunet.yu)

## References

- Children-refugees accommodation in kindergartens in Serbia: extraordinary statements by the Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Serbia No. 33 (1997) and 41 (1999), Belgrade.
- Dakar Conference (2000), Actuality 3, Ministry of Education Republic of Serbia, p. 17-25, Belgrade.
- Elementary and Compulsory Education in the World (1998), Ministry of Education Republic of Serbia, Belgrade.
- University Law (2002): Official Bulletin of Republic of Serbia, Belgrade.
- Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey II (2000): UNICEF Beograd.
- Pre-School Education in Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (2000), Federal Bureau of Statistics, Belgrade.
- Rado, P. (1999): Transition in Education (draft), Institute for Educational Policy, Open Society Institute, Budapest.
- Radovanović, B. (2000): Evaluation of Elementary Education in the FRY, FBS, Belgrade.
- Quality Education for all – a way of developed society (2002), Ministry of Education Republic of Serbia, Belgrade.
- Comprehensive analysis system Basic Education in FRY (2001): UNICEF Beograd.