



PRIMARY EDUCATION REFORM IN MONTENEGRO FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS

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Abstract/Povzetek The Montenegrin educational system at the beginning of the new millennium is characterized by intense reform efforts. The research aims to look at key aspects of the reform process in primary education in Montenegro from the perspective of its participants - teachers and parents. The qualitative research was carried out through focus group interviewing. The results show that considerable progress has been made, but they also point to serious shortcomings such as the lack of institutional support for schools in the processes of planning, teacher training and new curriculum implementation.

Keywords:

Montenegro, reform,
primary education,
pupil, parent, teacher.

Ključne besede:

Črna gora, reforma,
osnovna vzgoja in
izobraževanje, učenec,
starši, učitelj

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Reforma osnovne šole v Črni gori z vidika učiteljev in staršev Za črnogorski sistem vzgoje in izobraževanja v začetku novega tisočletja so značilna intenzivna reformna prizadevanja. Cilj raziskave je ogledati si ključne vidike tega procesa v osnovnem izobraževanju v Črni gori z vidika njegovih udeležencev – učiteljev in staršev. Kvalitativna raziskava je bila izpeljana z intervjuvanjem fokusnih skupin. Rezultati kažejo, da je bil dosežen precejšen napredek, a pokažejo tudi resne pomanjkljivosti – pomanjkanje institucionalne podpore šolam v procesu tako načrtovanja, usposabljanja učiteljev kot implementacije novega kurikula.

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Introduction

Education reform is a complex and serious process that requires the full commitment of all actors in education and in the society as a whole. An education system is fully developed and democratic only if it is comparable to modern democratic educational systems. The reform processes in Montenegro have affected all educational stages, from preschool through primary and secondary school, to higher education. Many quantitative and qualitative changes have been introduced in primary education. The transition was made from content and goal-oriented planning to outcome-based planning. In this paper, we examine the changes in primary education from the perspective of teachers and parents of pupils attending primary school. The main axis of the education reform in Montenegro concerns the adjustment of the Montenegrin educational system to European education standards and the improvement of learning outcomes.

Primary education in Montenegro is the initial and basic stage in the educational continuum. In the contemporary context, this educational stage, bounded by formal institutional frameworks, is becoming more visible and more marked, with the potential to develop faster and in a more comprehensive manner in the future. Educational systems are based on standards, and it is not advisable to have major differences in the interpretation of standards made by teachers and by the institutions responsible for their implementation (Näsström, 2009). It is no secret that school often has a detrimental effect on children's self-esteem. Ideally, school should provide an environment in which achievements would have fewer negative effects on self-esteem than in the real world (Brunner, 2000). A high-quality education system requires continuous monitoring, along with constant review, modification and improvement of its objectives, standards and outcomes. Since changes occur in different ways through the interaction of individuals in varied situations (Datnow et al., 2002), there is a need for a detailed monitoring of these changes in the classroom.

The European Commission in Brussels agreed upon and underlined its standpoint that education is a fundamental factor determining development of a country, and that only an increase in pupil achievements can increase economic performance and competitiveness in an open economy (European Commission, 2010, 2011). Generally, each reform requires a detailed analysis of the existing situation, as this represents a basis for the preparation and implementation of changes that should contribute to improving that situation. Numerous studies have identified key competencies in sustainability education essential for the design of appropriate teaching and learning methods (Wiek, Withycombe, Redman, 2011).

At the beginning of the 21st century, preparations began for launching the reform at all educational stages in Montenegro, but it was fully put into force in 2009. This was a serious and fully organized move, supported by all institutions within the system, while strategic reform goals were the developmental ones and integrated into the process of social, political and economic transition of Montenegro in the context of global changes. The fundamental goal of the reform was to create an educational system that would contribute to the creation of *knowledge for personal and social development*. This goal presupposes the equipping of society members with competencies necessary for economic progress and active participation in a democratic political community, as well as for success in the world of rapid, continuous and global change (Backović, 2001). Thus defined, the key goal of education required a fundamental transformation of the education system, and that is why the reform activities have resulted in significant structural changes. Some of these activities, such as the introduction of compulsory nine-year primary education and of the principles of inclusive education, aimed at increasing the availability and accessibility of education. Other activities focused on raising the quality of education and encompassed curricular reform (significant changes in the content and methods of teaching and learning, elective courses, etc.), but also the establishment of institutions with the responsibility for providing support to the system and improving the quality of education (Examination Center, Bureau for Education Services, etc.). Finally, a whole range of reform activities initiated changes in the management of the education system, guided by the principles of decentralization, deregulation and participation. Rapid development of science and technology and their expansion in the twentieth century had a strong influence on the development of education. Pupils are offered a variety of apps, important for the understanding of the lesson material (Hutchison, Beschorner, & Schmidt-Crawford, 2012). In such circumstances, new opportunities for acquisition of knowledge arise and consequently introduce innovations at all education levels. The reformed learning models require the use of diagrams, and pupils are required to explore and draw conclusions based on perception and interpretation of such diagrams (McTigue & Flowers, 2011) in order to make knowledge more functional. Understandably, complex social reforms such as an education reform need careful management. Such management is impossible without relevant information on the implementation of reform activities, goal-attainment and, finally, the outcomes of the education system. The goal-attainment evaluation as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of changes in teaching and learning (reform output) need to be conducted not only within proportional time spans, but also after goal completion, which is logically possible only after a lengthy period. On the other hand, the evaluation of the degree of implementation of reform activities (reform input), that is the degree of realization of operational objectives, is possible throughout the

reform process, and it regularly provides essential information that enables changes to and adjustments of the planned activities. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation of reform are included in the Strategic Plan for Education Reform of the Government of the Republic of Montenegro (Government of the Republic of Montenegro, 2005).

Some aspects of reform implementation captured the attention of the central institutions and organizations dealing with education. For instance, the Bureau for Education Services carried out a study on certain aspects of the reform processes in schools (Bogojević, 2009) and evaluated a new curriculum for the first cycle of primary education (Bureau for Education Services 2005). In addition, the Association of Parents of Montenegro (2007, 2009) evaluated the changes related to the participation of parents in school management and the organization of school life. The Open Society Foundation Institute - Representative Montenegro (FOSI ROM) provided financial and expert help in these evaluations. However, these evaluations did not address the range of important reform aspects that would provide systemic insight into the effectiveness of the reform implementation and the major problems it faced. That is why FOSI ROM supported *Montenegro Educational Reform Evaluation* over the period 2010-2012. This evaluation considered the degree of achievement of the reform's operational objectives in primary and general secondary education, as well as the final effect of changes to the educational system of Montenegro. This paper focuses mainly on primary education, and the selected results are typical from a teacher's point of view.

Teachers and parents from the perspective of primary education reform evaluation in Montenegro

Although the educational reform in Montenegro is aimed at transforming the entire education system, we decided to present only a few aspects of this reform from the perspective of teachers and from parents whose children are directly involved in the educational process of primary school.

Modernization of primary school curricula to offer more practical activities for solving problem situations is of particular importance, since learning should be experienced as fun and as a source of satisfaction (Lee, Kim & Yoon, 2015). The focus of reform evaluation from the perspective of teachers and parents involved six key aspects:

1. Reform evaluation
2. Teaching challenges
3. Teacher competencies
4. Parental participation

5. The role of central educational institutions
6. Mechanisms for quality assurance and quality improvement.

Methodology

Since educational reform entails considerable change, our research focuses on the reform outcomes, or more precisely, on identifying the effects of primary education reform in terms of quality of work and results achieved. The key question that we seek to answer is related to the following: Determining the extent to which the reform has improved the quality of teaching and whether it is in line with the expectations of parents and teachers. Or, whether teachers think that the dominant type of *teaching* reflects the reform goals (active learning focused on attainment of higher taxonomic knowledge levels and development of higher cognitive skills, development of critical thinking, communication skills and competencies for teamwork).

The answer to this question will include teacher views on instruction (learning and teaching), curriculum, textbooks, teacher competencies and mechanisms for monitoring and improving quality, as well as the parents' position on these topics. *The subject and the purpose* of the research is to obtain opinions of teachers and parents about the educational reform and its contribution to increasing the quality of teaching and the quality of the education system in general.

The aim of the research is to provide a picture of the quality of work accomplished in schools, with the intention of increasing the effects of the educational process by using experience-based opinions and comparing the revised school curriculum with the traditional one.

The research sample. Since the research deals with the reform that has taken root across the education system, we chose to include six focus groups in the survey sample (3 focus groups of teachers and 3 focus groups of parents) with an even number of respondents, 10 in each group from all three Montenegrin regions.

Table 1. The Research Sample.

Focus group	Region			Total
	Northern	Central	Southern	
Teachers	1	1	1	3
Parents	1	1	1	3

Research methodology. We conducted qualitative research, while implementing the research method of theoretical analysis, as well as the technique of group interviewing, which helped us gain a realistic picture of the problem from the perspective of teachers and parents. For the sampling method in the focus group of teachers, we used the principle of different profiles represented in each group (class teacher, teacher of the mother tongue, Mathematics teacher, foreign language teacher, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography and Music/Art teacher). The focus group of parents comprised parents of children from each primary school grade (grades 1-9) and one parent of a child with special educational needs. The survey was conducted between September and December 2018.

Research Results

The results of the qualitative part of the research were obtained by interviewing six groups of primary school teachers coming from three main regions in Montenegro. The same questions were used for all groups of teachers and parents, and referred to the evaluation of reform in general, the evaluation of various aspects of teaching (learning and teaching process, curriculum, textbooks, and teacher competencies) and the evaluation of the central education institutions, with a special focus on the processes of quality assurance and quality enhancement of education.

Evaluation of education reform in primary school from the perspective of teachers and parents

The focus group discussions were organized with primary school teachers from the three regions in Montenegro, and the respondents were from Bar, Pljevlja, Berane, Podgorica and Nikšić.

Reform evaluation

Primary school teachers gave different views on education reform, its impact and achievements in practice.

They expressed both positive and negative impressions:

Positive impressions:

- The nine-year primary education, coverage of 6 years-olds and early involvement in school.
- The opportunity to choose elective subjects.
- Commitment to learning foreign languages.
- English being a compulsory subject from the first grade of primary school.
- Learning two foreign languages.
- Education reform encourages development of thinking; greater cognitive activity of pupils.

- Textbooks and workbooks are better, more attractive and more interesting to pupils.

Negative impressions:

- It is necessary to educate teachers before starting the reform.
- Too much paperwork and too many administrative tasks.
- Ambiguity. The objective-oriented planning was introduced first, and then was changed for outcome-based planning, which remained unclear to most colleagues.
- Lack of material; it was necessary to equip schools with teaching materials and technology.
- Too extensive a curriculum for the given number of hours.

We can conclude that teachers are satisfied with the reform in terms of the increase in the quality of teaching and education in general. One of the positive aspects of the reform is the inclusion of six-year olds in primary school, because the early years of a child's life are crucial for developing various skills. Besides, teachers believe that the reform has encouraged foreign language (English language) learning, since English became a compulsory subject from the first grade of primary school. During the first reform phase, a foreign language had the status of an elective subject, but in the most recent stage, in 2017, a foreign language was placed in the category of compulsory subjects. Among the education reform strengths are elective courses that pupils choose according to their individual capacities and preferences. In addition, teachers point out that the textbooks and workbooks are modernized and much better graphically illustrated to meet the needs of young people. In their opinion, teachers prepare lessons more thoroughly and are more productive than they were in the old system, thus making pupils participate actively and reflect intensely on the current problem.

In addition to favourable opinions about some aspects of the reform, teachers express discontent with the training for implementing the reform solutions. Teachers expected the reform to admit the real problems of teaching. Therefore, teachers are not satisfied, since the reform did not provide adequate teaching equipment (classrooms and labs). The question is whether it is possible to organize a lesson so that it meets contemporary standards, requirements and needs by employing obsolete equipment or often without no teaching equipment in an outdated work space. The classroom environment is inadequate because it allows neither the selection of educational materials, nor an interactive and collaborative approach to problem solving; it also lacked a sense of privacy, i.e. distancing from other events and activities (Fields & Boesser, 1988). A learning space should be functional and adapted to the teaching methods applied by a given teacher (Kyriacou, 2001: 121). However, in our schools, especially in the higher grades, the

traditional seating arrangement still prevails, which is contrary to recent studies of the brain that indicate the pupils' need for more classroom dynamics and learning in motion. The traditional classroom seating arrangement is ineffective because most pupils, and even teachers, feel annoyed in such a classroom (Jensen 2003: 104). Furthermore, a substantial objection relates to the increased administrative work, often pointless, which did not burden teachers so much in the old school, when it used to be more functional. Moreover, teachers think descriptive assessment in the first cycle of primary school and written feedback interpreting a grade or a mark are unnecessary and constitute additional workload without positive effects.

The teachers expressed dissatisfaction in relation to professional development. Teachers from the northern region (Pljevlja, Berane) are categorical in their statement that, although there are numerous accredited professional development programmes, teachers are not provided with sufficient opportunities to engage in professional development. They believe that the Ministry of Education and the Bureau for Education Services should provide regular annual training of teachers, but this has not been the case. In practice, the number of seminars has decreased, and some teachers did not even receive basic training before the reform implementation.

At the same time, parents have pointed out the following:

Positive impressions:

- Teamwork among preschool teachers and class teachers in the first grade.
- A much more flexible approach to children and learning.
- A partner relationship of teachers with children and parents.
- An electronic register book and the possibility to access it from home; everyday control of pupil achievements.

Negative impressions:

- The curriculum and pupil overload. Reform was supposed to identify practical and applicable knowledge and skills and to reject unnecessary information.
- Teacher tardiness regarding electronic register books, because all marks are usually entered in the week when assessment is carried out, and parents lack timely access to their children's achievements.
- Descriptive assessment is unnecessary. It is motivating neither for children nor for parents.
- Textbooks are too large, and schoolbags are too heavy.

As for the positive experiences and views regarding the reform, parents are very pleased with the teamwork among preschool teachers and class teachers in the first grade. Interestingly, the respondents underline their satisfaction with the involvement of preschool teachers, both in terms of teamwork with the class teacher, and their individual work in before- and after-school care. Besides, parents noted greater flexibility in the reformed school as opposed to the traditional one. In this context, they emphasize teacher-parent and teacher-child relationships.

The most recent reform measures and the development of an e-register book were both positively evaluated by parents in cases when information were available to them in the course of assessment and not after it. An e-register book enables parents to have access to their children's achievements from home, so they can monitor the child's activities and performance.

Parents highlight both positive and negative effects of the reform, including curriculum and pupil overload. They also think unnecessary content overburdens children. Instead, emphasis should be placed on practical and applicable knowledge and skills.

It is interesting to note that teacher tardiness in completing the e-register book is placed among the negative effects. Teachers usually enter the final marks in e-register books during the last week of the term, and parents cannot gain insight into their children's achievements earlier, to react in a timely manner and help them improve. Parents who have experience in pupil assessment pointed out that descriptive assessment in the first grade is unnecessary and proposed a measure to exempt the first graders from assessment. Unlike teachers, who say that new textbooks contribute to positive impressions about education reform, the parents interviewed feel that textbooks were too large and too heavy, so they are not enthusiastic about these books.

Teaching challenges

When asked to identify the current issues in the classroom, which hamper or impede the reform implementation, teachers gave the following answers:

- The lack of teaching equipment, modern software and technology in their work. The reform included changes to the curriculum, but working conditions remain the same.
- Inadequate support of competent services in the field of teacher training for implementing the new outcome-based curriculum.
- Curriculum overload and instruction time (the number of classes).

- There is a mismatch between the educational cycles. The transition between cycles is difficult for pupils. (from grade 3 to grade 4, and from grade 6 to grade 7).

- Poor cross-curricular links.

Relying on teachers' answers, we can conclude that the reform did not yield the necessary investment in contemporary instructional materials and equipment. Teachers are dissatisfied with working conditions and believe that the reform should have changed that. Teachers also share their dissatisfaction regarding inadequate support from competent services in the field of teacher training for implementing the new outcome-based curriculum. They feel insecure and believe that the Ministry of Education and its departments should pay more attention to training, since they need to be well prepared to meet this new challenge. Furthermore, respondents in the focus groups highlight the major issue of curriculum overload and its relation to the instruction time allocated to school subjects (number of classes). In their view, it is necessary to reduce curriculum content or increase instruction time for successful curriculum implementation. Based on the survey responses, we can conclude that the reform has failed to overcome the main issues in relation to transition from lower to higher grades, particularly the transition from the fourth to the fifth grade of primary school. Teachers even see the transitions from third to fourth and from the sixth to seventh grade as critical ones. Moreover, the reform inherited poor cross-curricular links, but there is a growing need for different approaches to cross-curricular teaching and learning, as we all agree that interdisciplinarity turns knowledge into a coherent whole. It is interesting that the same remarks were made in all the focus groups, which means that these drawbacks are present in the system, and it is not about the subjective attitudes of respondents.

When asked to determine issues concerning the reformed teaching, respondents gave the following answers.

- Outdated, uninteresting teaching methods. The lack of visual teaching strategies.
- Lack of teacher commitment to meeting pupils' needs and expectations.
- Curriculum overload.
- The lack of parental involvement in decision-making.

Parents indicate that the lack of visual teaching strategies makes teaching methods outdated and uninteresting, which greatly affects the success of the reformed school. They believe that the reform does not pay enough attention to pupils' needs, and pupils are expected to give much more than they get at school, which has led to student anxiety. In addition, parents feel that they should be more involved in

school life. To this end, it is necessary to train teachers on the application of the principles of the reform as a new philosophy, ideology and approach to education, with a detailed plan and guidelines (Gutek, 2004), in order to update the instruction and make it more interesting to pupils.

Teacher competencies

Educational reform entails the development of new teacher competencies. Of course, this means that new competencies should be understood as an upgrade to existing competencies that are innovated and adapted. This includes adopting the new approach to teaching and learning, planning the pupils' learning outcomes and moving in the direction of performing the teaching role more effectively. Many teachers are unable to strengthen their professional competencies throughout their careers, in an ongoing professional development process. In this, central institutions of the education system are particularly important, but at the same time, teachers should initiate and actively engage in planning and implementing the professional development activities by themselves or with the support of school management.

In this respect, when asked about the competencies they need, teachers answered as follows:

- All teachers must be trained in planning learning outcomes, and that should be a priority of the institutions responsible for teacher training in Montenegro.
- We lack assessment competences in an inclusive school, even though we have been doing the task for years.
- There is a lack of seminars about integrated learning.
- Competence in critical thinking and learning is extremely important.
- Continuing development of methodological competence for modelling teaching in line with the reformed school requirements.

It is evident that teachers feel insecure in the field of planning for learning outcomes. This is one of the core competencies for successful learning, because positive results in learning are impossible without good planning. Teachers develop their own teaching skills as strategies that they use to facilitate pupils' learning. These skills are capable of being repeated in similar situations, and they should be encouraged (Wragg, 1993). Since training is one way to acquire particular skills, it is interesting that even though teachers received training for the reform implementation in Montenegro, many topics remain unclear to them.

It is also significant that teachers acknowledge their deficit of competencies for competent assessment in inclusive schools. Encouraging and developing of integrated learning by working on complex problems in a group, seems an inspiring field for the future development of teacher competencies. In this way, students construct higher level knowledge and expand the horizons of thought that would not be so successfully achieved in the usual activities (Šefer, 2005). In addition to these changes, an integrated approach to teaching and learning is a novelty in the work of teachers, and they are aware of lacking competencies for effective implementation of integrated teaching. Teachers think there has been little attention paid to critical thinking and to learning by critical observation of concepts and cause-effect relationships of a given phenomenon. For that reason, teachers need support in developing teaching competencies, because unconditional acceptance of and agreement with other opinions, often imposed, can lead to a position where black is white if others claim so (Stoll & Fink, 2000). Unfortunately, in our country, there is still a tradition that colleagues should have the same views and opinions. However, "being a colleague does not mean that you have to agree or share the same views" (Senge 2003, p. 238). Also, respondents state that they need continuous methodological training according to the requirements of the reformed school and the need to adjust their teaching practice to contemporary trends and pupil needs.

On the other hand, parents were very cautious in speaking about teacher competencies; nevertheless, they said that teachers should possess the following competencies:

- Good communication competencies necessary for developing partnership relationships.
- Teamwork competency, as extremely important for helping teachers understand that pupils are overloaded by the curriculum and plan their activities accordingly.
- Teaching outside the classroom would be much more effective, so teachers should develop competencies for this type of teaching and learning.

Based on the answers given by the respondents from the focus groups of parents, we can conclude that parents expect teachers to have competencies in organizing learning activities in a democratic way. Taking into account the perspective of their children, parents think teachers should have competencies necessary for communication with pupils, as well as skills to treat them as partners, keep them entertained in class and involve them in learning. Parents assume that building partnership relationships in the classroom would improve pupils' results. Parents also emphasize the importance of the teamwork competence. Effective teamwork

among teachers ensures an efficient teaching process. For example, collaborative planning may prevent teachers from conducting summative assessment of pupils in several subjects on the same day. Furthermore, teamwork competencies are of great importance for the establishment of trust in the classroom and for acceptance of obligations and commitments by all. An interesting observation is that teaching outside the classroom (a class in nature) would be much more effective, so teachers should develop competencies for this type of teaching and learning. According to some parents, the visual teaching of various topics would be more successful outside than in the regular classroom, since it would increase the pupils' interest in the subject matter. Such opinions should be considered in the reform efforts to overcome stereotypes and outdated habits in the organization of the learning process.

Parental participation

In order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, parents should be involved in the processes of discussing, proposing and adopting various initiatives whose aim is to improve working conditions and enhance learning outcomes. One of the important functions of parents in school is their involvement in the Parents' Council. Teachers expressed the following opinions regarding parental involvement in school:

- Parents play an important role in school life through the Parents' Council.
- Perhaps parents should be more involved in planning of a non-teaching days in such a way that they could plan and carry out some learning activities (a visit to a rural household or to a craft shop, etc.).
- There is a number of opportunities for parental engagement in school life, but given their indifference, such involvement does not often occur.

Teachers' responses show that the Parents' Council has a significant role in school life, as it consists of parent representatives who can harness this body to initiate and implement their ideas in school. In addition, teachers highlighted that parents should have an obligation to prepare some learning activities that could be implemented on non-teaching days. For example, parents could familiarise children with their jobs or occupational roles.

Teachers suggest that this could be done through visits to a rural household or to a craft shop typical of the local community. An important conclusion is that, although schools show appreciation, parents are not often interested in active

participation in school life. It is therefore necessary to encourage them continuously.

Parents commented on the issue of parental involvement in school life in the following ways:

- Participation of parents in school life is limited. There are bodies in the school through which we can launch an initiative, but it often remains unnoticed and therefore we do not attend the meetings of parents (PTA meeting and Parents' Council meetings).
- Our participation in school life is reduced to occasional visits when teachers invite us to present our jobs and occupations, and that is where our involvement ends.
- We believe that the reforms did not properly recognize parental involvement in school life, and if we want to make it sustainable, it needs to be legally justified.

It is evident that parents are dissatisfied with their degree of engagement in school life and believe that it should have a legal justification in order to be recognized in the work of the school. The parents are not interested in launching initiatives that will be rejected, and that is why they often do not attend PTA meetings and Parents' Council meetings. Sometimes, class teachers in the lower grades of primary school invite parents to present their occupations to children, and that is where their involvement ends.

The role of central educational institutions in the reform process

Teachers' opinions indicate their disappointment with the performance of the central educational institutions in the educational reform. They say they are left on their own to deal with the challenges of reform. Moreover, there isn't sufficient support and understanding from those who lead the reform, and there are things that unnecessarily complicate their job:

- The central educational institutions are constantly making new requests and have a commanding attitude.
- Teachers are often required to fill in forms and provide various types of data.
- These institutions exist, but they are of no use, because they are unaware of the difficulties of teachers' work.
- Teachers often feel as if they have been trapped by paperwork. Specifically, in the course of primary education, there are three registers and the same data is recopied three times.
- Central institutions fail to support schools, no matter how necessary it is at that moment.
- Teachers were not provided with training for outcome-based planning, which is crucial for reform effectiveness and sustainability.

Concerning teachers' attitudes towards institutional support in implementing the new approaches, we can conclude that there is general dissatisfaction with imposed administrative tasks. Likewise, respondents point out that there is no understanding and professional support from the relevant institution in resolving the numerous dilemmas in their work. These institutions are expected to help practitioners "break" the traditional approach, since they have "experience, systematic thinking and an original approach to the problem" (Vilotijević & Vilotijević, 2008, p.143). Understandably, such an attitude is the result of insufficient training in the course of reform preparation.

Parents have a slightly different perspective on this issue and emphasize the following points:

- Parents assume that the Ministry with its departments significantly affects the implementation of teaching in schools.
- The reform can only be successful if all its steps are well-planned and if all its participants work collaboratively.
- The central institutions have not accorded parents the role they should have in education reform.
- There is an obvious lack of teaching aids. It is impossible to talk about reform and to have positive expectations given the existing conditions in classrooms and labs.

Parents have one voice on the issue of the impact of the Ministry and its central institutions on the reform outcomes. Nevertheless, they are aware of the challenges that may determine the success of the reform in the absence of adequate institutional support for schools. Insufficient parental involvement in the reform process is also mentioned as one challenge of successful reform. In addition, they recognize poorly equipped classrooms as a key failure of the central institutions in promoting the quality of teaching and improving its outcomes.

Mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement in primary education

Quality assurance mechanisms and improvement strategies are essential for the sustainability of educational policies. Asked about the quality assessment mechanisms, teachers were highly critical. They believe that the existing mechanisms cannot determine the quality of teaching in a proper way, and these mechanisms should be revised and adjusted to real circumstances:

- Quality assessment mechanisms should conform to educational purposes and feasible options for a school to organize the teaching process.

- Those who talk about quality know how to criticize but do not provide examples of how things should be done, because they do not know themselves.
- The mechanisms for monitoring the quality of teaching include indicators for assessing the application of contemporary methodological approaches and the use of information and communication technology, and we know that a modernization of teaching practice was not achieved by the reform.
- In practice, supervisors visit schools every four years. I do not understand how they can evaluate the quality of someone's work by observing only one lesson once in four years.
- We are all different. One can work badly, but if he or she has connections in administration, his/her performance will be evaluated as excellent, and those who work well, will remain unperceived.
- Mechanisms for quality monitoring and quality assessment are unfortunately quite subjective and thus fail to improve teaching and learning.

The responses indicate serious deficiencies in the mechanisms for monitoring and determining the quality of the existing education system. If we start from the fact that analysis of everyday teaching situations is an element of a continuous learning process that ensures progress on a professional and personal level (Šagud, 2006, p.38), then we may rightly wonder whether the quality of an individual can be assessed during one visit in four years.

Moreover, several quality indicators presuppose the modernization of teaching and learning, and in practice we know that reform did not tackle the issue of modernizing the teaching process and the school climate in which instruction is given. In addition, it is worrying that protectionism still exists in the field of education, which obstructs objectivity and proper use of the existing mechanisms. Therefore, teachers rightly emphasize the subjectivity of existing mechanisms and the need for their improvement.

Parents have different experiences and therefore different opinions on the mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement in the quality of primary education:

- Mechanisms for monitoring and determining the quality of teaching and learning should be more visible and accessible to participants in the educational process.
- The previous practice yielded no progress in this direction; we are completely dissatisfied.

- Mechanisms should promote teaching and learning but also protect and enhance the accountability of pupils and teachers.

The parents express an objective opinion on the mechanisms for ensuring and further improving school quality. They suggest that not only teachers, but also pupils and their parents should become familiar with the mechanisms for preserving and enhancing the quality of school work. Parents also point out that the reform did offer innovative mechanisms; therefore, they highlight the need for developing objective mechanisms with a protective function, but also to increase accountability of both pupils and teachers. The final product would be better-quality outcomes of primary education.

Proposals for improvement

Teachers proposed measures for improvement of the current situation and expressed their expectations with regards to the reform changes:

- Reform should encompass all spheres of education, curricula and textbooks.
- It is necessary to create better working conditions.
- Reform cannot succeed without investment. It is necessary to invest in education, to improve the economic status of teachers.
- It is necessary to reduce the number of pupils per class.
- It is necessary to intensify teacher training and to increase the number of trained teachers.
- The Department for Textbook Publishing has a monopoly, and alternative versions of textbooks should be offered to teachers.

By analysing teachers' recommendations for improving teaching quality in primary school, we find that they cover a wide range of topics and deal with the social and professional spheres of school life. It is true that teachers' economic status is a prerequisite for successful work and a motivation for continuous improvement. Moreover, teachers rightly point to the obvious drawbacks of the reform, such as the lack of investment in improving working conditions.

We might rightly wonder whether to expect an increase in the quality of the teaching process in such poor working conditions. The reform should recognize the deficiencies of the previous system and plan and implement extensive changes accordingly. In addition to changes in curricula and textbooks, equipping schools with new technology, reducing the number of pupils per class, providing continued support for professional teacher development and offering alternative versions of textbooks are equally important for effective change in education.

Parents proposed measures for improvement of the current situation and expressed their expectations with regards to the reform changes, offering the suggestions below:

- Equip schools with the necessary equipment for the purposes of teaching in new and innovative ways.
- Avoid overloading pupils.
- Encourage the development of applicable knowledge rather than rote learning.
- Pay greater attention to the needs of parents and children.
- In addition to learning, give attention to the role of the school in children's upbringing, as well as to the social dimension of education.

These suggestions point to the necessary intervention of competent institutions in the improvement of the teaching environment and in providing support for pupils and teachers in the organization of teaching and learning. In addition, parents indicate the similarity of the new school with the traditional one in terms of student overload. This should be changed by developing the necessary skills to apply knowledge in practical situations. There is also a suggestion that parent's and children's needs should be taken into account and that attention should be paid to the role of the school in children's upbringing, as well as to the social dimension of teaching.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study, although a qualitative one, forms a supplement to a major education reform evaluation that was completed in 2012. Although we have not dealt with the evaluation of textbooks, curricula and teaching practice, our research and findings have emphasized the need for substantial change in the educational system of Montenegro, which need to be done in order to improve the quality of the reform and meet the expectations of the stakeholders (teachers and parents).

Research on primary education reform in Montenegro from the perspective of teachers and parents was conducted with the aim of analysing the quality of the reformed primary school context. The study focused on current problems, teacher competencies, parental involvement, the role of central institutions and mechanisms for quality assurance, i.e. on the building blocks of the teaching and learning environment for primary school children. Since the education system in Montenegro went through a process of transformation from the traditional to the modern system, comparable to developed education systems in Europe, the experience of respondents (teachers and parents) revealed a multitude of diverse,

often fluid, but also developmentally important findings. Our research has shed light on several dilemmas in relation to the effects of education reform, from the perspective of separate categories of respondents. We uncovered a certain ambiguity, but also potential directions for further development of existing teaching practice in order to build a school tailored to 21st-century pupils.

By analysing teachers' and parents' responses, we can see that teachers and parents are generally inclined towards the reform, but their expectations have not been completely fulfilled, which indicates serious failings in the implementation process. Poor socioeconomic circumstances in society at a given moment might have contributed to this, as there were no preconditions for reform implementation in all aspects of the educational process.

Among the responses we received, one can be emphasised: parents and teachers consider the introduction of nine-year primary school and the inclusion of six-year olds in primary school a great success, because early childhood is the most intensive period for acquiring various skills.

Analysis of the responses obtained in the focus groups generally confirms the fact that educational reform in Montenegro brought major changes, but because of the many unresolved problems that were present in traditional teaching, there is still the question whether its effects would be more productive than those obtained in the previous system. It raises the question of justification for such a reform.

Bearing in mind that education reform in Montenegro took root a long time ago, allowing sufficient time for the public to reach an objective assessment of its effects, teachers and parents observed several limiting factors for successful implementation of reformed teaching in primary school. The key issues are the number of pupils per class, the lack of technology, the lack of professional literature and teacher professional competencies, as well as insufficient parental involvement in school life.

The education reform in Montenegro, regardless of its shortcomings, should be seen as an attempt to improve the educational process and its effects. The research results showed that teachers have a positive opinion about the reform, when it comes to the need for change. However, regardless of this view from teachers, there are many problems hindering reform in the classroom. This study has managed to identify those problems that prevent efficient curriculum planning and implementation.

In order to overcome these problems, we propose the following measures:

- Provide technical preconditions for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. Equip classrooms and labs with modern teaching aids and didactic materials.
- Provide effective continuing professional development for all teachers to enable them to address the challenges of the reformed teaching.
- Reduce the number of pupils per class to 25, instead of 33, and in classes attended by children with disabilities, this number should be reduced by 20% or up to 50%, depending on the degree of disability, which should be determined by the special education commission.
- Intensify the activities of the subject teachers' groups in schools in the field of exchange of experiences, teamwork, and co-planning of teaching in accordance with the reform requirements.
- Improve measures for monitoring and quality evaluation of teaching practices in line with the reform requirements and in consultation with teaching staff and parents.
- Intensify the support of the central educational institutions (Ministry of Education, Bureau for Education Services, Examination Centre and Department for textbooks publishing and teaching aids).
- Reduce curriculum load.
- Increase parental participation in school life.
- Pay attention to the role of school in children's upbringing as well as to the social dimension of education.

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