

Some Aspects of the Primary Education Reform Process in Montenegro from the Perspective of Teachers

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Abstract

In the first decade of the XXI century, the Montenegrin educational system has undergone an extensive reform at all levels. This paper is aimed at identifying the most important reform processes in primary education, initiated by the 2004 practical implementation of the reformed curricula. That year the first generation of students was enrolled in the nine-year primary school program. The general objective of the primary education reform was a fundamental transformation of the ordered core of the educational context, which required significant structural changes such as the introduction of compulsory nine-year education, openness of school or increased availability of and access to education. On the other hand, the reform of primary education, which entails a curricular reform, was aimed at improving the quality of education (significant changes in the content and methods of teaching and learning, introduction of elective courses, etc.). In the end, the whole series of reforms initiated the continuous professional development of teachers in the field of application of modern methods and teaching techniques that allow adjustment and adaptation to the real situation of the reform process in the education system. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of the reform processes in primary education. Therefore, we have tried to present the fundamental values of the existing reformed educational context, supporting it by research results of the reform evaluation conducted in the period from 2011-2012 in the wider territory of Montenegro.

Keywords: primary education / reform / aspects of the reform process / nine-year education / teacher / student.

1. Introduction

Education is the most sensitive link of a society, since a society is developed and democratic to the extent that its educational system is developed and inclusive at the same time. "It's no secret that schools often have detrimental effect on children's self-esteem and that ideally schools should provide an environment in which our results are at less negative self-esteem consequence than in the real world "(Bruner, 2000: 50). A good educational system is causally linked at all levels and requires continuous monitoring. This means constant reviewing, modification and improvement of its objectives, standards and outcomes. As the changes occur in various ways through the interaction of individuals in different situations (Datnow et al., 2002), these changes require detailed monitoring in the various school grades.

Since larger or smaller changes are periodically made in all spheres of human activity, the education system as well is subject to periodic extensive reform processes. Montenegro has started preparing reforms in education at all levels at the beginning of the 21st century which became fully operational in practice in 2009. This is a serious and completely organized approach to reform, supported by all institutions of the system. The reform aims to further develop the educational system as this has become an integral part of the process of social, political and economic transition of Montenegro in the context of global change. The basic objective of the reform is shaping the education system which will result in the creation of knowledge for *personal and social development*.

This objective entails the training of members of a society not only for gaining the competencies essential for economic growth and active participation in a democratic political community, but also to successfully cope with the world of continuous, rapid and usually global change. Thus defined key objectives on the Educational level require a fundamental transformation of the education system which results in numerous reform activities and significant structural changes. One part of these activities, such as the introduction of compulsory nine-year educational system and the application of the principles of inclusive education, has been directed towards increasing the availability of and access to education. The second part has been focused on raising the quality of education: it has involved a curricular reform (significant changes in the content and methodology of teaching and learning and the introduction of elective courses ...) as to establish and build institutions to support the system and improve the quality of education (Test Center, Department of Education ...). Finally, the whole scope of activities has initiated changes in the area of the educational system, by means of the principles of decentralization, deregulation and participation.

Thus, the crucial point of the education reform in Montenegro is a higher quality of education, which has resulted in numerous management mechanisms. It is understandable that the complex social reforms, such as an education reform, demand to be carefully managed. Such management is impossible without the relevant information on the implementation of reform activities, the degree of realization of the goals and, ultimately, their outcomes in the education system. The estimation of realization of the overall objectives (goals) of the reform, or consideration of end effects of changes in the educational system (output reform) requires not only continuous monitoring within proportionately lengthy cycle, but this needs to be done following their completion, which is logically possible only after a long period of time.

On the other hand, the assessment of the degree of implementation of reform activities (reform of inputs), and the degree of realization of operational goals (objectives) is possible during the entire reform process, and it regularly provides essential information to allow adjustment and adaptation of reforms in the educational system. For this reason, monitoring and evaluation are an integral part of the reform of the Strategic Plan of Education Reform of the Government of the Republic of Montenegro.

Some aspects of reform implementation partly drew the attention of some institutions or organizations. For instance, the Institute of Education carried out a research on certain aspects of the reform process in schools¹ and evaluated a new curriculum for the first cycle of primary education², while the Association of Parents of Montenegro evaluated changes related to the participation of parents in school management and organization of school life³. All of the aforementioned financial and professional evaluation was supported by the Open Society Foundation Institute - Representative Montenegro (FOSI ROM). However, as it lacked serious evaluation of a range of important aspects of the application of reforms that would provide systemic insight into the degree of its implementation and the major problems faced, FOSI ROM supported *Evaluation of educational reform in Montenegro* in the period 2010-2012⁴. This evaluation included consideration of the degree of realization of the operational objectives of the reform of primary and general secondary education, as well as the final effects of changes in the educational system of Montenegro. This paper focuses primarily on basic education and the selected results are typical of a teacher's point of view.

2. The Focus of the Evaluation of the Reform of Basic Education from the Perspective of a Teacher

Although the educational reform in Montenegro was aimed at transforming the entire educational system, we decided to show only certain aspects of these reforms regarding the primary education from the perspective of a teacher. The main point of the evaluation of the reform of the elementary education from the perspective of a teacher concerned five key aspects:

1. Evaluation of the reform;
2. Problems in teaching process;
3. Teaching competence;
4. The role of the central institutions of the education system;
5. Mechanisms ensuring and improving quality.

3. The Methodological Framework of the Research

The research we carried out was mainly focused on the goals of the reform, which a special emphasis on the comparison of the reform objectives and their practical realization. The key questions that we wanted to answer were related to:

Determining the extent to which the reform has improved the quality of the teaching process and whether it is compatible with the expectations of teachers, or, more precisely, if the teachers believe that the dominant type of teaching practice reflects the goals of the reform (stimulates active learning focused on acquiring higher levels of knowledge and the development of higher cognitive skills, stimulating the development of critical thinking, communication skills and competencies for teamwork).

So, the answer to this question will involve a teacher's attitude towards the teaching process (teaching and

¹ *Implementation of Reforms in primary and secondary schools in Montenegro*, eds D. Monnier, Podgorica: Institute of Education, 2009.

² *Evaluation of teaching and learning in civic education and civic education in elementary and high schools and*, Podgorica, Institute of Education, 2008.

³ *The analysis of the teaching process and objectives of the curriculum of the 1st grade of thereformed primary school*, Podgorica, Institute for education, 2005.

⁴ *Monitoring and evaluation of education reform from the perspective of parents*, Podgorica: Parents' Association of Montenegro, 2009. *The new gymnasium from the perspective of parents*, Podgorica: Parents' Association

learning), curriculum, textbooks, teachers' competence and mechanisms for monitoring and improving quality.

The objective and aim of the research was to get the opinions of the teachers about the reform and its contribution to increasing the quality of teaching practice and educational system in general. The aim of the research was to, based on the empirical thinking and the comparison of the reformed school curriculum with the traditional mode, get a picture of the quality of the results obtained in terms of increasing the effects of the educational process in the present and the near future.

The research sample. Since the research was related to the reform that was put into force in the overall educational system, we decided to take five focus groups with a uniform number of subjects, 10 in each group from five Montenegrin cities.

The methodology of the research. In a survey we conducted a qualitative research with applied research methods of the theoretical analysis, as well as the technique of group interviews which helped us to, by means of the dynamic interaction of focus group; get a realistic picture of the studied problem.

4. Results of the Research

The results of the qualitative part of the research were obtained by interviewing five groups of respondents comprised of primary school teachers from five cities from three regions (Bar, Pljevlja, Berane, Podgorica and Niksic). Questions were the same for all groups of examinees, and were related to the assessment of the reform in a general sense, evaluation of various aspects of teaching (learning and teaching, curriculum, textbooks, teaching competence) and the assessment of the central institutions of the system, especially the aspect of quality assurance and quality improvement.

5. Evaluation of the Reform of Education from the Perspective of the Primary School Teachers

The teachers have different opinions regarding the educational reform, its effects and application. The positive comments are the following:

The children now start school at the age of six, which is good that attention is given to the early development and opportunities of children of that age.

There are elective courses, so that students choose courses according to their interests and abilities.

The emphasis is placed on IT literacy.

The children are taught a foreign language from the first grade, which results in their attention to learning foreign languages.

About 20% of available program activities teachers can plan themselves.

The reform has come at the right time; books are better than those offered in the traditional school system - both visually and thematically.

The teachers note that the lessons have been prepared more efficiently.

New educational system encourages the development of thinking and contemplative activity of the students.

On the other hand, there were negative reactions and comments relating to the reform and the teaching process.

We will highlight the most frequent ones:

The number of students is higher than what is acceptable for a new system of education, 33 students is too many for a quality work.

The lack of modern teaching technology, since the reform has not provided the necessary equipment for the teaching process.

The administration has significantly been increased. The teachers think that there is a lot of unnecessary paperwork and administrative duties.

Evaluation is needlessly complicated in comparison to the traditional system.

Descriptive assessment is pointless and it doesn't motivate the students and teachers.

Only the first generation of the teachers have passed all the courses, not the others.

The free training for all teachers should be provided.

It can be concluded that the teachers are satisfied with the reform in the segment which refers to some important issues that increase the quality of education and teaching in general. One of the positive aspects of the reform, according to the respondents, is the scope of six year-olds, because the early age is very important for the development of intellectual skills. In addition, the teachers believe that the reform emphasis has been placed on computer literacy, which is much better than the old program. Another positive is introduction of a foreign language (English) from the first grade of primary school, which is fully justified and the authorities should be forced to declare English a compulsory subject,

because although optional in the first cycle, all children regularly take it and accept it.

As a good side of the reform teachers have emphasized the freedom they have been given while creating the curriculum, which refers to the 20% of program activities that can be created by themselves, according to the detected needs of the students. The good side of the reform are the elective subjects that students choose according to their own abilities. In addition, teachers point out that textbooks and workbooks are picturesque and more modern, meeting the needs of young people, and they stand out as a better solution than the old textbooks. The teachers think they are forced to prepare for the classes and are more productive than they used to be, which results in encouraging greater student activity as well as intense contemplation and reflection of the current problems.

Besides the positive reviews on the reform, the teachers mainly express discontent regarding the number of students in a class. Teachers expected that the reform would solve the problems of overcrowded classrooms and consequently reduce the number of students per class, however, unfortunately this was not accomplished. Besides the excessive number of students in their classrooms, the teachers are not satisfied with the equipment (in the work rooms and classrooms), so the question is whether the classes can be organized by modern standards, requirements and needs with the underdeveloped equipment, or, often, without any teaching equipment and in a poor working space.

The teachers think that their working space is not satisfactory, because it does not provide a variety of different materials that have educational potential, interaction and a collaborative approach to problem solving, as well as a sense of privacy, i.e. distancing from other events and activities (Fields & Boesser, 1988). The working place in schools should be functional and appropriate for teaching methods (Kyriako, 2001: 121).

The traditional way seating arrangement is the most unproductive, according to the students and even teachers (Jensen, 2003: 104). Besides, a quite noticeable objection of the teachers is related to the increased administrative duties, often unnecessary paperwork. Teachers consider descriptive assessment completely unnecessary, since it leads to unnecessary workload without specific positive effects to either teachers or students.

The teachers have also expressed their dissatisfaction regarding professional development, although there are numerous accredited professional development programs which they cannot attend, especially if they are situated in the northern region (Pljevlja, Berane). They believe that the Ministry, through the Department of Education is supposed to provide regular annual professional development of teachers, but the situation is completely different. In practice, there are fewer seminars and some teachers haven't even attended the basic ones.

6. Problems in the Teaching Process

The objective of the research was to get the information about the teachers' attitude towards the current problems regarding the reform its implementation. Teachers pointed out the following problems:

There is a mismatch between the education cycles. Students find it much more difficult to adapt to the material in the transition from one to the other cycles (from 3rd to 4th grade, as well as from class 6th to 7th).

Poor connectedness between the subjects and programs.

The material is unevenly distributed across the grades. The teachers cannot fulfil the curricula goals.

The program is applicable to those students who are more than below average intellectual level, while the gifted ones are set aside.

The respondents' answers proved that the reform has failed to bridge the present transition from a lower to higher grades that was a huge problem in the traditional elementary school, regarding the transition from the fourth to the fifth grade. The teachers now highlight the controversial transition from the third to the fourth and the sixth to the seventh grades. Moreover, the reform has inherited a poor inter-connectivity, and we are all well aware of the fact that without the integration of different program contents, the knowledge remains incomplete. In addition, there is a disproportionate burden of the age periods in the same subject area which is not at all commendable for a reform.

7. Teaching Competence: The Lack of Knowledge and Skills

When asked about the teaching competences, the teachers have pointed out the issues regarding professional development. They pointed out that the training helped them on the professional level in terms of improving their competence, but also highlighted the sorts of training they consider necessary in their professional development, mainly highlighting various types of training that would contribute to the development of their competencies, and, at the same time, commented on some of the earlier forms of seminars and trainings:

We lack the competence assessment, especially those descriptive ones.

It would be good to introduce online seminars.

There is a lack of competence in the development of critical thinking and active learning.

We are never confident when it comes to working with children with special educational needs.

Since the teachers develop their own teaching skills which help the students learn what is planned, they are often repeated in similar situations and should be encouraged (Wragg, 1993). Since the training is one of the ways of acquiring specific competences, it is interesting that, despite the training the teachers have gone through, there are still numerous unclear things related to the teaching process. Respondents recognized the descriptive assessment as problematic, since it carries a number of dilemmas and inaccuracies.

Thus, this field seems inexhaustible in terms of teachers' interest in the disclosure of a number of dilemmas. Since the seminars organized by the Department of Education are becoming rare, the respondents recommended online trainings to ensure the dissemination of ideas of reform, while from an economic point of view it would be entirely feasible.

The equally important fact is that the teachers have concluded that they do not govern, to a necessary extent, competencies that provide encouragement and development of critical thinking and active learning, working on complex tasks in groups, because in this way their knowledge is put on a higher level, expanding the horizons of thought that would not be so successfully achieved in individual activities (Schaefer, 2005). In addition, as the work with children with special needs in inclusive education is a complete novelty in the work of the teachers, they realize that there is a big lack of competences when it comes to working with this group of students.

The respondents have pointed out the lack of competence in the area of critical thinking which is very important for education reform and changing awareness of the importance of their own views and opinions, since an unconditional acceptance and agreement with others, leads to the view that black can be white if it is claimed by others (Stoll & Fink, 2000). We, unfortunately, still believe that our colleagues were right. On the other hand, "being a teacher does not mean that you need to agree or share the same views" (Senge, 2003: 238).

As a part of this question, the teachers were asked to assess the extent to which the professional development programs organized by the Department of Education meet their needs. Teachers' responses were moving in the direction of criticism, such as:

Department of Education generally designs and implements the training programs well, but the problem is that you should plan and implement workshops for all the teachers in the state and not for a selected group. Usually, the same people go through a number of programs, and the vast majority is left aside. The problem is that the Department does not follow the continuity of all the teachers, regardless of whether their schools are included in these training programs. The teachers pointed out that it would be necessary that the Department of Education organizes open days with the objective to share opinions and ideas among the participants.

Therefore, teachers are generally dissatisfied since they are not able to attend all the seminars organized by the Department of Education, which does not take into account the equal rights of all to attend them, because that's one way to act in a "professional sphere with the aim of expanding professional, methodological, theoretical and practical view" (Mićanović, 2012: 51). This observation must be considered as justified since it should work on overcoming stereotypes and wrong habits. It is necessary to promptly and thoroughly educate teachers about the application of the principles of the reform, as a philosophy, ideology and approach to education with a detailed plan and work instructions (Gutek, 2004).

8. The Role of the Central Institutions of the Education System

The teachers were very critical when it comes to the operation of the central educational institutions. They believe that they are left to their own devices, to deal with the challenges of reform and there is not enough support and understanding for them:

Central institutions of the system are just always asking for something and that relationship is based on the commanding.

Filling in and sending data is the most important thing for those who created the reform.

The teachers often feel as if they have been administratively trapped. Specifically, in the course of primary education there are three central books and the same data is written over three times.

Central institutions always fail when it comes to their support, no matter how necessary it is at that moment.

When it comes to the attitude of teachers towards the support from the central state institutions regarding the implementation of the reform, we can conclude that there is a general dissatisfaction with numerous administrative tasks. However, they point out that you do not find understanding and professional support in terms of number of dilemmas in the course of work. They are expected to help practitioners to "break" the traditional approach, and they are the ones who have "experience, systems of thinking and original approach to the problem" (Vilotijević & Vilotijević, 2008: 143).

9. Mechanisms for Quality Assurance and Improvement

When asked about the mechanisms of quality assessment, the teachers are mainly critical. They consider that the quality of teaching and implementation of the curricula cannot be properly identified by the existing mechanisms, and that this should be revised and adapted to the real circumstances of educational institution.

Those who talk about quality usually criticize, without providing examples of good teaching, because they themselves are ignorant.

There is a need for usage of modern information technology for purpose of monitoring the quality of teaching and we know that reform hasn't done anything to modernize educational system.

In practice, every fourth year is supervised. I do not see how it could be possible for anyone to assess the quality of one's work after 4 years through observation of just one class.

The responses indicate a serious lack of tools for monitoring and verification of the quality of work. If we accept the fact that through constant checking and analysis of the teaching situations during the day, teachers are constantly learning and making progress on a professional and personal level (Šagud 2006: 38), then the question is whether one supervision every four years can assess the actual quality of the individual.

Besides, some quality indicators include renewing of the organization and implementation of the teaching and learning process, and in practice we know that reform doesn't include the modernization of teaching and the school environment. There is also a particular concern related to the fact that there is still protectionism that obstructs objectivity and applicability of the existing mechanisms for quality assurance in the educational process.

10. Proposals for Changes

Teachers have offered the proposed measures for improvement of the current situation in order to provide practical results for the reform:

Reform should be done in all the areas, not only in changing the curricula and textbooks.

It is necessary to provide better working conditions.

No reform can succeed without any investments; you need to invest in education, to improve the financial status of the teaching staff.

It is necessary to reduce the number of students in classes.

Intensify education of the teaching staff; increase the number of trained teachers.

Department has a monopoly over textbooks and should offer several alternative versions.

An analysis of teachers' recommendations for effective reform showed that they literally cover a wide spectrum and interfere with the social and professional spheres. It proved to be true that the financial status is a prerequisite of a successful work and motivation for continuous improvement in practice. In addition, teachers rightly point out evident deficiencies of the reform, such as the lack of investment in improving the conditions in which educational process is carried out.

We can rightly ask whether with the outdated technology of work an increased effectiveness of the teaching process can be expected. The mere substitution of the curricula and textbooks is not enough. The reform should recognize the deficiencies of previous systems, and based on that plan carry out the extensive modifications. In addition to the changes in terms of the curricula and textbooks, the modifications have to be related to the investing in the education process which involves equipping schools with new technology, reducing the number of students in the class community, providing continued support for the professional development of teachers and offering a variety of textbook editions.

11. The Conclusion with the Proposed Measures Aimed to Improve the Reformed Teaching

By analyzing the responses of the teacher-subjects, we can generally conclude that there is a positive attitude towards the reform, but their expectations have not been fulfilled to a great extent which indicates serious flaws of the reform process. The possible reason for this can be the material situation, poor socio-economic status of the society at a given time and a lack of the conditions for a complete implementation of the reform into the educational process that directly or indirectly affect it.

We can say that the teachers approve of the introduction of the nine-year primary school and consider the inclusion of 6-year olds into the educational process a great success since the early age covers the most intensive period of children's intellectual development. The teachers believe that the reformed teaching process provides better

knowledge than the traditional approach, but they also believe that generally poor working conditions at schools and teaching competences in the application of modern methods in practice have a negative impact onto the teaching process. Thus, there is an evident competence problem.

We can note that the development of teachers' competences in the tested population is not sufficiently attended, which inevitably results in suggesting the need for a more serious approach to central educational institutions of the additional professional development of teachers. As a result of the lack of quality teaching competencies we have a situation where teachers rarely plan and implement by active methods the activities that foster creativity, teamwork, active learning, communication skills and critical thinking in their work. For the improvement of practice we have to change a lot of things in all the areas related to teacher training as to obtain a reformed teaching.

The analysis of the responses obtained in the focus groups, in general, confirms the fact that the reform of the Montenegrin educational process brought numerous significant changes, but because of the many unresolved problems that followed the traditional teaching there is still the question whether its effects will be more productive than those obtained in the previous system.

It is understandable that teachers in the reformed teaching require continuous professional development seminars, since the existing expertise and experience in the practice cannot guarantee a positive outcome of the reform compared to the traditional instruction. At the same time, as the main disadvantages of the reformed educational system they point out the implementation of the reformed curriculum with outdated teaching technology work.

Bearing in mind that the reform of the education system of Montenegro came to life a long time ago, leaving space for a more objective assessment of its effects, teachers believe that there are limiting factors for successful implementation of reformed teaching in the primary school, in the first place the number of students in the groups (classes), then the lack of technical support, lack of professional literature and professional competences of the teaching staff.

In order to increase the quality of teaching, the planning and implementation of reformed teaching should improve teacher competencies, equip classrooms with modern equipment, reduce the number of students in the groups (classes), develop competencies for integrated learning and provide real support for the central institutions of the education system.

The results showed that teachers have a positive opinion about the reform, when it comes to the need to introduce changes. However, regardless of this view of teachers, there are many problems hindering the reform in the classroom. In this research we have been able to identify the problems that prevent the necessary curricula realisation. The key issues are the number of students in the classes, the lack of technical equipment in the classrooms, lack of professional literature, as well as the lack of teacher competences.

We believe that the following measures would be helpful, when it comes to overcoming the mentioned problems:

- Provide technical support in the implementation of the planned objectives. Equip the classrooms and offices with modern teaching equipment and educational material.
- Provide ongoing professional development for all teachers in order to enable a more effective planning and implementation of reformed teaching.
- Reduce the number of students per class to 25, instead of 33, and in the case of inclusion of children with special needs, this number should be reduced by 20% in mild cases and up to 50% in severe disability cases, subject to assessment of a special educational committee.
- Intensify the professional activities at schools regarding the exchange of experiences and team work, teaching the reformed planning requirements.
- Improve monitoring measures and determine the quality of the work in consultation with the teaching staff.
- Intensify the support of the central institutions of the education system (Ministry, Department of Education, Examination Centre and the Institute for textbooks and teaching aids.)
- Develop a system of monitoring and evaluation of teaching and practical work of professionals in the field of labour according to the reformed requirements in all subject areas and at all levels of schooling.

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