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## Teachers, parents and students attitudes towards private and alternative schools: The case of Serbia

**Abstract:** This study aims to understand the attitudes of teachers, parents and students of pedagogy towards private and alternative schools. The applied instrument consists of two sub-scales, and the sample included 441 subjects. The results indicate that respondents have neither expressed negative nor expressed positive opinion about private and/or alternative schools; they believe that there are no significant differences between them. Based on the results of the study, it is possible to conclude that in order to improve the conditions for opening and developing alternative and private elementary schools in Serbia, it is necessary to disseminate information about their activities to professionals and parents.

**Keywords:** school pluralism, Serbia, private and alternative schools, school choice, quality of education.

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## Introduction

In the modern world, education plays a vital role in responding to challenges of global development changes. From the 1970s through to the present day, the problems of school and education in almost every country have been treated as a significant social issue. However, the continued dissatisfaction with the quality of education has led to attempts to improve its quality. The literature about the analysis of the school system quality stresses the need to overcome certain approaches and practices that have not proved to be efficient enough to respond to the needs of a modern society (OECD 1998; Ridl 2003; *Strategy of education ...* 2012; Vrčelj 2000). There is, therefore, a need for reforms and changes that in various parts of the world emerge with different intensities and with varying degrees of success (Ridl 2003). These reform demands are not new, and they are mainly focused on establishing student-based teaching, on developing education closer to the child's needs, on promoting the pedagogy of active learning and acquiring of useful knowledge and skills and on developing democracy in society.

The movements of reform pedagogy, of new or progressive education, appeared in Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and numerous trends and models strove to overcome the weaknesses and shortcomings of schools, teaching and education. Critical review of conventional schooling continued in the period that followed. The result of this struggle was the introduction of new legislative giving greater freedom of action to the parents, as well as establishing private and alternative schools (where the democratic social system so permitted). Generous financial was provided by the state, so long as the schools met the clearly defined quality standards (OECD 1998).

### *Private and alternative education*

One of the main characteristics of pluralistic societies is that they offer alternatives in different areas of life, including in education. Hence, school pluralism grows alongside political pluralism in societies with a developed democracy. This

means that in addition to schools established and funded by the state, compulsory schools may also be established by certain groups of citizens, citizen's and teacher's associations, religious communities, as well as by local governments and other legal entities (Matijević 2009). Although school pluralism is associated with the work of private and alternative schools, it is important to note that these two concepts are not synonyms; the terms private and alternative education do not equate.

The term 'private education' is often used to indicate the education that does not belong to the category of public education. However, private education is a concept that encompasses a range of highly diverse situations. According to the most common interpretation, the term 'private education' refers to the kind of education established and funded by an individual, a non-governmental body or an association, all of which are still subject to the relevant laws (Eurydice 2000, p.10). Within this sector, however, there is a difference between private education in its strict sense and budget-supported private education. While private educational institutions in the strict sense are entirely funded by an individual or a non-governmental body, budget-supported private educational institutions receive some financial assistance from public authorities, which may or may not be significant.

Regarding alternative schools, they became particularly relevant after state schools were criticised for not satisfying the needs of society and its citizens (Vrceļ 2000, p. 34). This raises the question of the different ways the term 'alternative school' is defined in the literature (Milutinović 2011; Nagata 2006; Raywid 1999; Sliwka 2008; Spevak 2001). Some authors (Ridl 2003) point out that any school or movement could be considered 'alternative' depending on the criteria used to define it. This is using the term 'alternative school' in a broader sense. More narrowly speaking, it refers only to schools labelled by the term 'alternative' in the 1970s at the time of public dissatisfaction with the content and organisation of public education and the establishing of schools based on the perceptions of certain social groups. From this point of view, the priority criterion applied to define the term 'alternative school' is the pedagogical specificity of certain educational institution itself. Seen in this context, alternative schools — including classical ones founded in the 1920s — are characterised by education focused on a child. The innovative and flexible curriculum is based on the students' needs and interests; the active participation of students, parents and stakeholders in the school life and school development is encouraged. In this framework, alternative education implies it is different from the dominant educational trends represented by the state, represented in public and private schools.

Although most EU Member States have decades of experience in managing private and alternative schools, it is important to point out that at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these schools attracted the interest of countries in which pedagogical and academic pluralism had been impeded (Milutinović and Zuković 2013). In many countries of Central and Eastern Europe the educational reforms — which have been initiated by transitional processes of political democratisation and pluralisation — have also encompassed the re-establishment of private sector education and the establishment of alternative schools.

Such a transformation is imperative for educational reform in the Republic of Serbia as well. In Serbia, there is a definite need not only to adjust the current school system to the requirements of the new era, but also to listen to the attitudes of various relevant stakeholders towards the development of school pluralism. When it comes to the functioning of private and alternative schools in Serbia, this kind of school pluralism in the Republic of Serbia is still in its developmental phase.<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that *The Law on Primary Education* (2013) introduced the term ‘schools of special pedagogical orientation’, and permitted the establishment of private schools as well as alternative schools (Montessori, Decroly, Steiner and similar programs), once the Ministry determines that the realization of its program provides achieving standards for completion of the elementary education. In addition, this law does not mention budgetary support for private education — the cost of schools with a special pedagogical orientation is neither fully nor partially covered by the state.

Starting from presumption that the existence of private and alternative schools can bring dynamism and innovation into educational institutions (Spevak 2001), we shall continue our study by dealing with the opinions on private and alternative schools. We look at the perspective of teachers as direct stakeholders in the educational process, the perspective of parents as direct participants in the choice of school, and the perspective of students of pedagogy as future leaders and important disseminators of the idea of pedagogical and school pluralism.

## Method

### *The aim and objectives of the study*

This study aims to understand the attitudes of teachers, parents and students of pedagogy towards private and alternative schools. The study is operationalised through two research tasks: (1) examine the opinion of the respondents about the significance of the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools; and (2) examine the opinion of respondents about distinctive features of private schools compared to public schools.

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<sup>1</sup> In Serbia, private education is most developed at the pre-school and higher education level, while the number of private primary and secondary schools is significantly lower. The private educational institutions require verification by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and their work is not funded by the state, except for the preschool sector where certain compensations are being made (Spasenović and Vujisić Živković 2017). Most private schools operate in accordance with the official curriculum, while some of them include elements of certain alternative pedagogical conceptions in their programs. When it comes to alternative schools, there is only one Montessori elementary school in Serbia, which has not been verified by the Montessori Association, but it applies the principles of Montessori pedagogy. This school operates according to the national curriculum and has been accredited since 2015 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. The alternative pedagogical concept ‘Step by Step’, which is a model in some state schools, has a somewhat longer tradition of operating in Serbia; in fact, since 2002-3, the Step-by-Step model has been implemented into elementary schools as an educational practices aimed at children.

### *Study instrument*

In order to achieve the study tasks, we have applied the instrument designed for the purpose of this study<sup>2</sup> which consists of two sub-scales.

The first sub-scale consists of 10 items relating to the significance of the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools. The respondents were given the opportunity to choose one of the offered answers on a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – partially disagree, 3 – undecided, 4 – partially agree, 5 – strongly agree). The results of the factor analysis indicate that it is a one-dimensional scale. The percentage of the explained variance of the first isolated components was 41.27, and the other was strikingly lower result at 12.82. This is also supported by the correlations of items with the first principal component, which were all high, exceeding even .44. In addition, the results of the factor analysis indicate a high level of internal consistency of items. The alpha coefficient was 0.83.

The second sub-scale contains 11 items used for assessing the distinctive features of private schools compared to public schools. The respondents were given the opportunity to choose one of the answers on a three-level scale (1 – disagree, 2 – there is no difference, 3 – agree). The results of the factor analysis used to check the main components of scales show that it is a one-dimensional scale. The percentage of the explained variance of the first isolated component was 35.31, and the other was markedly lower at 12.31. This is also supported by the correlations of items with the first principal component, which were all high, exceeding .30. Item no. 1 has a markedly lower (.36), but it still is a significant correlation with the first principal component. The results of the factor analysis indicate a high level of internal consistency of the items, as evidenced by the coefficient of reliability (the alpha coefficient), which was 0.81.

In addition to the presented scales, the questionnaire also included questions about socio-demographic characteristics of respondents: teachers – seniority (years of work experience) and type of teaching process; parents - education level and financial status of the family and students of pedagogy - year of study.

### *The study sample*

The study was carried out in eight elementary schools within the territory of the City of Novi Sad and at the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad. The study sample consisted of 441 respondents. It is a convenience sample, and a generalisation of the data can only be made on the hypothetical population. The sample consisted of three groups of sub-samples:

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<sup>2</sup> The instrument was designed according to the model of a similar instrument used in the Republic of Croatia (Rajić 2008). Certain questions, though, were modified and adapted in accordance with the specific characteristics of the current educational context in the Republic of Serbia. The preliminary validation of the metric characteristics of the instrument has shown that all the claims have satisfactory factorial saturation.

teachers who work in public elementary schools (with mainstream educational programs) (N=153); parents whose children attend public elementary school (with mainstream educational programs) (N=189) and students of pedagogy at the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy (N=99). The structure of the sample according to measured socio-demographic characteristics are the following: a) teachers – years of work experience (fewer than 5 years – 15.7%, from 5 to 15 years – 34.6%, more than 15 years – 49.7%) and teaching process type (class teaching - 45.8%; subject teaching - 54.2%); b) parents – level of education (elementary school – 4.2%, secondary school – 38.1%, higher school university – 52.4%, MA/MSc/PhD – 5.3%) and estimated financial status of family (good – 28%, average – 67.2%, bad – 4.8%); c) students of pedagogy – year of study (second year – 54.5%, fourth year – 45.5%).

### *The statistical analysis*

For statistical analysis of the data, we used the software package SPSS 12.0. Within the descriptive statistics, we measured average values (arithmetic mean value) and the dispersion of results (standard deviation). To investigate the latent structure of the measured variables, we applied factor analysis, and to analyze the statistical significance of differences, we applied the t-test and  $\chi^2$  test and one-way variance analysis (F-test), as well as post hoc analysis (Scheffe's Test).

## **Results**

### *The role and impact of private and/or alternative schools*

Based on the analysis of descriptive statistical data obtained at the level of the entire sample, it was determined that the overall average score for the first was  $M = 3.35$ , with  $SD = 0.69$ , which means that the respondents do not have either an emphasised negative or an emphasised positive opinion about the significance of the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the average scores of teachers', parents' and students' responses for each item.

Items	Teachers		Parents		Students of pedagogy	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. Public schools should offer a variety of alternative concepts of education so that parents can choose the model that they think is best for their child.	2.9	1.2	3.6	1.1	3.9	0.9
2. Alternative schools provide greater opportunities for students to fully accomplish their potential.	3.4	1.4	3.1	1.2	3.8	1.1
3. Private and alternative schools provide greater opportunities for the teachers to use their creativity.	3.3	1.3	3.6	1.1	4.0	0.9
4. Private and alternative schools open more opportunities for introduction of innovations in the education contents.	3.3	1.2	3.1	1.2	3.6	1.0
5. Students in private schools are better prepared to continue their education at higher levels.	2.3	1.1	2.5	1.0	3.0	1.0
6. Teachers in private schools have better working conditions.	3.5	1.1	3.5	1.0	4.0	0.8
7. In alternative schools, more attention is paid to the needs and interests of each child.	3.5	0.9	3.4	0.9	4.2	0.8
8. The communication between teachers and parents is of better quality in alternative schools.	3.2	0.9	3.2	1.0	4.1	0.8
9. Private schools provide a higher level of student safety.	3.1	0.9	3.0	0.9	3.6	0.9
10. The state should financially support the opening and operation of private and alternative schools so that they can be equally accessible to all children.	3.1	1.1	3.2	1.1	4.2	0.9
	M= 3.17, SD= .70		M= 3.24, SD= 0.66		M= 3.85, SD= 0.44	

Table 1: Opinions of respondents on role and impact of private and alternative schools

*Teachers' responses.* The results obtained in the sample of teachers show that the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M = 3.17$ , with  $SD = 0.70$ , which does not differ largely from the findings obtained at the level of the entire sample. The analysis shows that the highest average scores were obtained in items no. 6 ( $M = 3.5$ ), no. 7 ( $M = 3.5$ ) and no. 2 ( $M = 3.4$ ). Namely, most teachers partially or strongly agree with the statements that *teachers in private schools have better working conditions*, that *in alternative schools, more attention is paid to the needs and interests of each child* (although there is also a very high percentage of undecided when it comes to this statement – 43.8%), and that *alternative schools*

*provide greater opportunities for students to fully accomplish their potential.* On the other hand, the lowest average score is for item no. 5 ( $M = 2.3$ ), which indicates that most teachers do not agree either at all or partially with the statement that *students in private schools are better prepared to continue their education at higher levels.* A high percentage of 'undecided' responses are evident for item no. 8 (*The communication between teachers and parents is of better quality in alternative schools* – 50.3%) and for item no. 9 (*Private schools provide a higher level of student safety* – 41.8 %).

*Parents' responses.* The results obtained in the sample of parents show that they have very similar opinion as teachers: the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M = 3.24$ , with  $SD = 0.66$ . The analysis shows that the highest average scores were obtained for items no. 1 ( $M = 3.6$ ), no. 3 ( $M = 3.6$ ), and no. 6 ( $M = 3.5$ ). Most parents agree strongly or partially with the statement that *public schools should offer a variety of alternative concepts of education, so that parents can choose the model that they think is best for their child, that private and alternative schools provide greater opportunities for the teachers to use their creativity, and that teachers in private schools have better working conditions.* On the other hand, the lowest average score is for item no. 5 ( $M = 2.5$ ), with most parents not agreeing either at all or partially with the statement that *students in private schools are better prepared to continue their education at higher levels.* However, a significant number of parents (31.7%) are undecided about this statement. In addition, a high percentage of 'undecided' responses are noted for item no. 9 (*Private schools provide a higher level of students' safety* – 45.5%).

*The responses of students of pedagogy.* The results obtained in the sample of students of pedagogy show that the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M = 3.85$  with  $SD = 0.44$ , which represents a somewhat higher result compared to the previous two groups of respondents. Therefore, it can be concluded that the responses of pedagogy students are more inclined towards a positive opinion on the significance of the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools. After the analysis of students' responses, it is possible to note that the highest average scores are for items no. 7 ( $M = 4.2$ ), no. 10 ( $M = 4.2$ ), and no. 8 ( $M = 4.1$ ). This means that most students of pedagogy agree either strongly or partially with the statements that *in alternative schools, more attention is paid to the needs and interests of each child, that the state should financially support the opening and operation of private and alternative schools so that they can be equally accessible to all children, and that the communication between teachers and parents is of better quality in alternative schools.* The lowest average score is for item no. 5 ( $M = 3.0$ ); most students, however, remain undecided (41.4%) concerning the statement that *students in private schools are better prepared to continue their education at higher levels.* Furthermore, the results show that an undecided attitude is also present with respect to statement no. 9 (*Private schools provide a higher level of students' safety* – 38.4%) as well as with statement no. 4 (*Private and alternative schools open more opportunities for introduction of innovations in the education contents* – 35.4%).



*Differences in responses depending on the measured socio-demographic characteristics.* The testing of differences in the responses of teachers and parents show no statistically significant differences for any of the measured socio-demographic characteristics: teachers – the length of work experience ( $F(149.2) = 0.74$ ;  $p = .48$ ) and the teaching process type (class teaching and specific subject teaching) ( $t(149) = 0.36$ ;  $p = .72$ ); parents<sup>3</sup>– level of education ( $t(184) = 0.53$ ;  $p = .60$ ) and financial status of the family ( $t(183) = 1.53$ ;  $p = .13$ ). Statistically significant differences are evident only in the responses of pedagogy students, depending on the year of study (Table 2).

	Year of study	M	SD	t	df	p
The attitudes about the significance of the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools	2nd	3.76	0.46	-2.21	7	.029
	4th	3.95	0.40			

Table 2: Differences in responses of students of pedagogy depending on the year of study

The obtained values show that the students in fourth year achieve higher scores; they have more positive attitude towards private and alternative schools compared to in second year.

*The differences in the responses of teachers, parents and students of pedagogy.* Applying a one-way analysis of variances shows that there are significant differences in the obtained responses between teachers, parents and students of pedagogy ( $F = 39.33$ ;  $df_1 = 2$ ;  $df_2 = 435$ ;  $p = .000$ ). The post-hoc Scheffe's Test shows that there are significant differences between the students and other groups ( $p < .001$ ) — students of pedagogy have a more positive attitude about the role and impact of private and/or alternative schools than parents and teachers. The differences in responses between parents and teachers are not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ).

### *Distinctive Features of Private Schools vs. Public Schools*

Based on the analysis of descriptive statistical data obtained at the level of the entire sample, the overall average score for the second scale is  $M = 2.42$ , with  $SD = 0.37$ . This means that most respondents believe that there are no significant differences between private and public schools, whereas for some features they give a slight advantage to private schools. Table 3 provides a detailed overview of the average scores of teachers', parents' and students' responses for each item.

<sup>3</sup> At the level of the sample of parents, we merged certain categories in order to obtain a balanced number of subjects within the categories: two groups for the education level (1 – elementary and secondary education,  $N = 80$ , and 2 – higher university education, MA or PhD degree,  $N = 109$ ), and two groups for the financial status of the family (1 – bad and medium financial status of the family,  $N = 136$ , and 2 – good financial status of the family estimate,  $N = 53$ ).

Items	Teachers		Parents		Students of pedagogy	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. Private schools provide better quality work due to a small number of students in classes.	2.8	0.5	2.5	0.7	2.8	0.4
2. Private schools have better conditions for teachers working with children with disabilities	2.5	0.6	2.5	0.6	2.9	0.4
3. Private schools open more opportunities for introduction of innovation in the educational process organisation.	2.3	0.5	2.4	0.6	2.8	0.4
4. Parents are more involved in school life and work in private schools.	2.3	0.6	2.3	0.6	2.5	0.6
5. Private schools are characterised by greater care for the child before and after school.	2.4	0.6	2.4	0.6	2.4	0.6
6. Private schools are more focused on healthy diet and sports activities.	2.5	0.6	2.5	0.6	2.5	0.5
7. In private schools, children learn foreign languages more.	2.5	0.5	2.6	0.5	2.7	0.5
8. Private schools are more focused on the development of social sensitivity and tolerance among students.	1.9	0.7	2.0	0.7	2.3	0.7
9. Children with behaviour problems are better disciplined in private schools.	1.8	0.8	2.0	0.7	2.2	0.7
10. The communication between teachers and parents is better in private schools.	2.2	0.6	2.3	0.6	2.7	0.5
11. Children are provided better computer literacy in private schools.	2.6	0.5	2.5	0.6	2.7	0.5
	M= 2.35, SD= 0.59		M= 2.36, SD= 0.61		M= 2.59, SD= 0.44	

Table 3: Opinions of respondents on distinctive features of private schools vs. public schools

*Teachers' responses.* The results obtained in the sample of teachers show that the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M= 2.35$ , with  $SD= 0.59$ . The obtained values do not differ greatly from the findings obtained at the level of the entire sample. Based on an overview of the average scores of teachers' responses for each item, the highest average scores are for features no. 1 ( $M= 2.8$ ), and no. 11 ( $M= 2.6$ ), which means that most teachers believe the advantage of private schools over public schools is reflected in features referring to the *class size* and the possibility of being trained in *computer literacy*. On the other hand, the lowest average score is for features no. 9 ( $M= 1.8$ ), and no. 8 ( $M= 1.9$ ), which shows that most teachers believe that *disciplining of children with behaviour*

*problems and development of social sensitivity and tolerance among students* are not the features that could be considered as the advantage of private over public schools. It is also important to note that many “there is no difference” responses are notable in features that refer to *better possibilities for introduction of innovations in the educational process organisation* (67.3%) and *communication between teachers and parents* (55.6%).

*Parents’ responses.* The results obtained in the sample of parents show that the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M = 2.36$ , with  $SD = 0.61$ . Similar to teachers, parents believe there are no significant differences between private and public schools; they give a slight advantage to private schools in some of the features. The results of average scores of parents’ responses for each item show that the highest average scores are for features no. 7 ( $M = 2.6$ ), no. 1 ( $M = 2.5$ ), no. 2 ( $M = 2.5$ ) and no. 11 ( $M = 2.5$ ). Thus, the majority of parents believe that the advantage of private over public schools is largely reflected in features related to *foreign language learning*. Furthermore, parents recognise the advantage of private over public schools in items related to the *class size, conditions for teachers working with children with disabilities*, as well as opportunities *to be trained in computer literacy*. On the other hand, the lowest average score is for features no. 8 ( $M = 2.0$ ) and no. 9 ( $M = 2.0$ ). The obtained result coincides with the result obtained from the sample of teachers; thus, the majority of parents also consider that there is no difference between private and public schools when it comes to *disciplining of children with behaviour problems and development of social sensitivity and tolerance among students*.

*Responses of students of pedagogy.* The results obtained in the sample of students of pedagogy show that the arithmetic mean value of average scores for the entire scale is  $M = 2.59$ , with  $SD = 0.44$ . The resulting value of the average score for this group is slightly higher than for the previous two groups. For most of the measured features, these responses are more inclined to highlight the advantages of private over the public schools. Based on overview of the average scores of students’ responses for each item, the highest average scores are for features no. 2 ( $M = 2.9$ ), no. 1 ( $M = 2.8$ ) and no. 3 ( $M = 2.8$ ). Thus, the majority of students of pedagogy believe that the advantage of private over public schools is mostly reflected in the *conditions for teachers working with children with disabilities, class size and the better possibilities for introduction of innovations in the educational process organisation*. Furthermore, it is also important to note that the obtained average scores for all other measured features show that the student responses are mainly inclined towards emphasising the advantage of private over public schools.

*Differences in responses depending on the measured socio-demographic characteristics.* The testing of differences in responses obtained at the level of the sample of teachers and parents shows no statistically significant differences for any of the measured socio-demographic characteristics: teachers – length of work experience ( $F(145.2) = 0.07$ ;  $p = .93$ ) and type of the teaching process (class teaching – specific subject teaching) ( $t(145) = 0.97$ ;  $p = .33$ ); parents – level of education ( $t(182) = 1.39$ ;  $p = .17$ ) and financial status of a family ( $t(181) = 1.43$ ;  $p = .16$ ). Statistically signifi-

cant differences are evident only in the responses of pedagogy students, depending on the year of studies (Table 4).

The attitudes about distinctive features of private schools vs. public schools	Year of study	M	SD	t	df	p
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	2.51	0.29	-3.12	97	.002
	4 <sup>th</sup>	2.68	0.26			

Table 4: Differences in responses of students of pedagogy depending on the year of studies

The obtained differences show that students in fourth year have higher scores, as compared to students in their second year of studies; the fourth year students emphasise more the advantages of private schools over public schools.

*Differences in responses of teachers, parents and students of pedagogy.* Applying a one-way variance analysis determines that there are significant differences in the obtained responses between teachers, parents and students of pedagogy ( $F = 14.93$ ;  $df_1 = 2$ ;  $df_2 = 428$ ;  $p = .000$ ). The post-hoc Scheffe's Test shows that there are statistically significant differences between students of pedagogy and other groups of respondents ( $p < .001$ ) — students of pedagogy emphasise much more than parents and teachers the advantages of private over public schools. The differences in responses between parents and teachers are not statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

The fact that the introduction of pedagogical and school pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe largely represented an attempt to deviate from the ready-made public schools typical of previous school systems is very important for this study. In many countries of this region, high expectations from private education have emerged equally from the political and educational aspirations, and they have been founded on the assumptions of on the superiority of private education sector and possibilities of self – generating of changes in the educational process (Klus-Stanska and Olek 1998). However, the success of a new education system is contingent upon a high level of awareness among parents. Thus, for example, an analysis of the situation in the Slovak Republic (Matulčíková 2003) showed that the current problem of school choice resulted from the lack of experience of parents in deciding which school to choose for their children among those available to them, which are often attractive but insufficiently known.

Although our research was conducted on a convenience sample, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings, the results suggest that a similar problem exists in Serbia. The results of the study show that surveyed teachers and parents have neither an emphasised negative nor an emphasised positive opinion about the significance of the role and impact of alternative schools, which is probably due to the general absence of school pluralism in Serbia, especially when it comes to alternative schools. Most surveyed teachers agree with the statement that alterna-

tive schools pay more attention to the needs and interests of each individual child. However, there are many undecided responses when it comes to this statement, although almost by rule, these schools have a qualitatively different approach to the educational process and to the orientation towards children's needs and interests (Milutinović 2011; Sliwka and Istance 2006; Sliwka 2008). A similar situation in response analysis can be observed with the statement that communication between teachers and parents is of better quality in alternative schools, although the distinctive feature of alternative schools is the joint participation of students, teachers and parents in the school life (Nagata 2006; Spevak 2001). In addition, although the introduction of elements of alternative pedagogical concepts in Serbian public schools is a much more realistic expectation than the rapid development of school pluralism, a small number of surveyed teachers are of the opinion that public schools should offer diverse concepts of education so that parents can choose the model they think is best for their child. The study also shows that the majority of surveyed teachers and parents alike do not agree with the statement that students in private schools are better prepared to continue their education at higher levels, which can probably be attributed to their previous experience or information about the work of private educational institutions in Serbia. In contrast, many parents in Poland (as in the United States, for example), are turning to the private education because of the expected high educational outcomes for their children (Johnson 1995; Klus-Stanska and Olek 1998; Plank 2006).

However, the surveyed students of pedagogy have a different opinion. They have a more positive attitude towards private and alternative schools than parents and teachers. Many students of pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University in Novi Sad (the curriculum of the Pedagogy Department includes contents from the areas of school and pedagogical pluralism) partially or strongly agree with the statement that public schools should offer a variety of concepts of education so that parents can choose the model that they think is best for their child. Also, in comparison to the other two groups of respondents, the students of pedagogy recognize the importance of public (co)financing of private and alternative education as a way of achieving higher accessibility and greater possibility of choices regarding education.

The respondents' opinions about the distinctive features of private schools compared to public schools show that most surveyed teachers and parents think that there are no significant differences between them. For example, while some authors (Cox and Witko 2008) argue that private schools are regulated in a less bureaucratic way, which results in a greater degree of autonomy and in a more favourable environment for parental involvement in school activities. The results of our study, however, indicate that a significant number of surveyed teachers and parents think that there is no difference between private and public schools in terms of parents' involvement in school life. In the sample of teachers, many 'no difference' responses are also present when it comes to the features related to better opportunities for innovation in the educational process and the quality of communication between teachers and parents. A similar situation can be

observed in Poland, where some authors (Klus-Stanska and Olek 1998) reported data indicating that when it comes to educational innovations, many schools in the private sector provide supplementary education to the public education system. The private sector offer education slightly different from that provided in public schools, which has been conditioned by economic, social and political factors. However, in studies of the development of the private education sector in Poland, and its contribution to the democratisation process and quality of education, conclude that private education has contributed to a variety of educational choices to innovation in the education system, particularly in comparison to earlier periods.

Despite there being no significant difference in preferences between private and public schools in this study, teachers and parents give a slight advantage to private schools for some features — the size of classes, training in computer literacy, learning foreign languages and teachers working with children with disabilities. These answers potentially suggest the tendencies of development of private education in the Republic of Serbia, which is similar to the condition of the education systems of certain Central and Eastern European (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) in the 1990s, when the transitional processes of political democratisation and pluralism initiated the opening of private schools. Some authors (Kozakiewicz 1992; Sliwka and Istance 2006) indicate that in this period organisers of private schools sought to limit the number of children in the class so to individualise teaching and to intensify foreign languages learning, which started from the first grade of elementary school.

Finally, the differences in the responses of teachers, parents and students of pedagogy show that students of pedagogy emphasize the advantages of private over public schools to a significantly greater degree than parents and teachers. Regarding the advantages of private schools, they emphasise the conditions for teachers working with children with disabilities, class size and better opportunities for innovation in the educational process. The obtained average scores for other measured features suggest that surveyed students of pedagogy, especially in the senior years of their study (after studying within the fields of school and pedagogical pluralism), note numerous advantages arising from implementing a policy of school choice. In this context, this study confirms the findings of some authors (Rajić 2008) that the level of information is very important when it comes to attitudes about private and alternative schools. To improve the conditions for opening and developing alternative and private elementary schools in Serbia, it is necessary to disseminate relevant information to teachers and parents. It is clear that alternative and private schools, whether defined through academic results or social contexts, do not guarantee a positive deviation in relation to the majority standard, but they certainly do provide an opportunity for the development of pluralism in education. Therefore, providing information about school choices (about their benefits but also about their potential risks and challenges) can empower the parents to make the best choice for their child regarding the types of schools offered and can empower teachers to creatively use the curriculum.

## Conclusion

Judging from the assumptions about private and alternative education, the openness towards the development of school pluralism is still in its initial stage in Serbia. A general finding from this study is it is important continuously inform parents about private and alternative schools. The results also indicate the need to introduce contents in the fields of pedagogical and school pluralism into the curricula of teachers' faculties. They also reveal a need to continue educating teachers in this area through seminars and professional development programmes, which would be implemented by the relevant educational institutions.

All of this is very important, since the introduction of school choice in the education system raises many questions. Thus, for example, experiences from Europe and the United States suggest that this school choice has a tendency to increase the educational gap between the privileged and underprivileged (Ambler 1994; Butler and van Zanten 2007). The problem certainly arises from the fact that members of different social classes significantly differ in motivation, their effort and time spent in obtaining information on educational options. It seems that school choice can contribute to social stratification, and create more opportunities for better informed parents to enrol their children in the best schools.

The limitations of our research include, foremost, the research sample. The possibilities for generalization are limited also results from the fact that since the sample consists of teachers, parents and students from only one city – Novi Sad (even though it is the second largest city in Serbia as well as a major industrial and financial centre, university city and school centre of AP Vojvodina). To overcome these limitations, similar research should be conducted through examining the opinions of respondents from other parts of Serbia. This is related to the need for further comparative study about positive foreign experiences (especially in countries with a developed democracy and healthy economy) and the possible ways of applying those experiences to different education levels in Serbia (Savićević 2000). Western European countries follow somewhat different educational policies in terms of private and alternative schools (for example, the different amount of financial support that individual countries provide to private and alternative schools). Given the similarities between Serbia and these other transitional countries, it is very important to understand their histories of transition to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the development of educational policies in Serbia.

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### **ODNOS UČITELJEV, STARŠEV IN ŠTUDENTOV PEDAGOGIKE DO ZASEBNIH IN ALTERNATIVNIH ŠOL: PRIMER SRBIJE**

**Povzetek:** Namen študije, ki smo jo opravili, se je nanašal na razumevanje odnosa učiteljev, staršev in študentov pedagogike do zasebnih in alternativnih šol. Inštrument, ki smo ga uporabili, je sestavljen iz dveh podleštvic, nanj pa je odgovarjalo 441 posameznikov, ki so bili vključeni v vzorec. Rezultati kažejo, da respondenti nimajo niti izrazitih negativnih niti pozitivnih stališč o zasebnih oz. alternativnih šolah, pri čemer verjamejo, da med javnimi in zasebnimi šolami ni pomembnih razlik. Sklenemo lahko, da bi bilo za zagotavljanje boljših pogojev za delovanje in razvoj alternativnih in zasebnih šol v Srbiji nujno prizadevanja usmeriti zlasti v širjenje informacij med strokovnjake in starše o dejavnostih, ki jih te šole izvajajo.

**Ključne besede:** šolski pluralizem, Srbija, zasebne in alternativne šole, izbira šole, kakovost izobraževanja.

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