

*The 28th International Scientific Conference
“Educational Research and School Practice”*

**THE STATE
PROBLEMS
AND NEEDS
OF THE MODERN
EDUCATION
COMMUNITY**

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

Editors

Jelena STEVANOVIĆ

Dragana GUNDOGAN

Branislav RANĐELOVIĆ



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EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS OF ACHIEVEMENT IN LOWER PRIMARY EDUCATION: CLASS TEACHERS' OPINIONS²⁹

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Introduction

The quality of education dictates the stability of social development and global economic competitiveness of a country. Namely, “the measure of success for any education and training system should be what people actually learn from it, and how effectively” (Jessup, 1991: 2).

Educational standards constitute one of the solutions for raising the quality of education. Uncontestably, they bear immense importance for the general improvement of an education system. However, they are no less crucial for achieving excellence and providing equal opportunities to all students. Likewise, it should be emphasized that educational standards represent a distinctive feature of what is known as the new concept of education or *education based on standards*. This manner of organizing primary and secondary education originated in America. More specifically, it emerged in the USA, Great Britain, and Australia, but was soon adopted by many countries (e.g., China,

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India, South Korea, Brazil, Germany, France, and Russia) In fact, over the past three decades, the application of educational standards has spread across the world.

„Before this change, education was primarily defined in terms of educational goals and teaching programs that were based on content. The new model has shifted the focus to the outcomes of education, that is, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that a student should adopt and develop by participating in the process of education” (Baucal, 2013: 8).

The standards of student achievement encompass “outcomes that have precisely determined qualitative and quantitative dimensions, that is, measurable, necessary (mandatory) achievements significant for further learning and a productive life“ (Trivić *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, educational standards focus on equipping students with real and applicable knowledge, since outcomes require outcome-based education and verification that the set goals and tasks have indeed been achieved and realized. In the same vein, Bašić emphasizes that educational standards act as both goals and criteria, since they propose and unambiguously formulate learning goals, while simultaneously serving as criteria for education quality, that is, the efficiency of learning and teaching processes (Bašić, 2007: 117).

According to the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, which was adopted in 2009 as a part of education reform, it was necessary for the Republic of Serbia to introduce multiple sets of standards of achievement for different education forms and levels within the education system. In the Republic of Serbia, the academic year of 2009/2010 marked the beginning of use of standards of achievement in ten subjects at the end of primary education. The academic year of 2011/2012 saw the introduction of standards of achievement in the subjects of Serbian, Mathematics, and Nature and Society (The World Around Us) at the end of lower primary education. Finally, in the academic year of 2013/2014 came the introduction of standards of achievement in eight subjects at the end of general high school education, along with standards of achievement at the end of adult basic education.

Namely, since the year 2000, Serbia has gone through numerous and quite turbulent changes in education policy and practices. However, even though the process of education “reform changed in both direction and conception more than once, educational standards of student achievement were included in each conception” (Baucal, 2013: 7). Therefore, these standards can rightly be considered one of the crucial

factors that articulate the purpose and goal of education at a certain level of education in the Republic of Serbia.

Previous studies have focused on various questions related to the development and application of standards of student achievement in Serbia. Some believe that the main challenge in the process of educational standard development in Serbia lies in striking the optimal balance between “the language of academic knowledge” and “the language of competencies” in the formulation of the standards (Baucal, 2013: 19). Certain authors have reported that according to teacher opinions, in Mathematics classes in lower primary education, educational standards least affect the process of evaluating and grading student achievement (Maričić i Špijunović, 2014). Likewise, an analysis of educational standards for the subjects of Biology, Physics, and Chemistry at the end of compulsory education in Serbia revealed a lack of focus on the research approach and the development of students’ higher-order cognitive skills and abilities in the teaching of these subjects (Gašić Pavišić, 2012).

Therefore, according to the available literature, research attention has focused on questions related to the development and formulation of standards of student achievement as well as challenges that the Serbian education system has faced during this process, along with teacher opinions on the function of educational standards in Mathematics classes in lower primary education and natural science classes in upper primary education. However, less attention has been devoted to the general importance of standards in education, viewed from the perspective of the key actors in this process.

Having in mind the previous statements, the aim of this study was to explore the ways of applying educational standards in lower primary education and survey teachers’ opinions on the function and significance of educational standards in the general improvement of lower primary education, as well as to identify potential variations in the application of educational standards and opinions about them depending on teacher’s work experience and level of education.

Method

Sample. The sample is convenient and consistent with 82 class teachers employed at primary schools throughout the Republic of Serbia. Participants differed in terms of

work experience and education levels. Table 1 shows the sample structure based on years of work experience and education.

Table 1. *Sample Structure: Years of Work Experience and Education*

Years of work experience	N	%	Education	N	%
Up to 15	19	23.2	College	19	23.2
Between 16 and 25	22	26.8	Undergraduate studies	57	69.5
More than 25	41	50	Postgraduate studies	6	7.3

Instrument. The results presented in this paper constitute a segment of a wider exploratory study conducted with the application of the survey technique. A questionnaire was designed with the goal of determining what class teachers thought about the function and significance of educational standards in the general improvement of lower primary education. The first part of the questionnaire served to collect participants' sociodemographic data (gender, years of work experience, and educational background), while the second part of the questionnaire comprised a set of (open-ended and closed-ended) questions. In this paper, we present the findings pertaining to closed-ended questions, including (1) information of ways of using educational standards in Serbian, Mathematics, and Society and Nature classes and ways of documenting their use within pedagogical documentation; (2) teachers' opinions on the contribution of educational standards to lower primary education; (3) data on ways of documenting the use of educational standards; and (4) data on how frequently teachers used educational standards when devising their teaching plans.

The research processes. The questionnaire was distributed electronically. Teachers filled out the questionnaire individually, voluntarily, and anonymously. The research was realized in the first semester of the academic year of 2022/2023. The obtained data were processed using the methods of descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the obtained data on the use of educational standards in the teaching of Serbian, Mathematics, and Nature and Society (The World Around Us). These data indicate whether teachers most frequently used educational standards during regular, remedial, or supplementary classes.

Table 2. *Manners of Using Educational Standards in the Teaching of Serbian, Mathematics, and Nature and Society (The World Around Us)*

Subject Class Type	Serbian		Mathematics		Nature and Society	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Regular Classes	77	93.9	75	91.5	79	96.3
Remedial Classes	5	6.1	5	6.1	1	1.2
Supplementary Classes	1	1	2	2.4	2	2.4

The results revealed that educational standards were most frequently applied in regular Serbian, Mathematics, and Nature and Society classes. Their use was less frequent in remedial classes and particularly rare in supplementary classes. The results of our research complement the results of a study in which teachers reported on the role of educational standards in the improvement of early mathematics education. Namely, in the aforementioned study, teachers believed that educational standards made the greatest contribution to successful organization of regular Mathematics classes, followed by remedial and supplementary Mathematics classes, in that order (Maričić i Špijunović, 2014). The finding that educational standards were most frequently applied in regular Serbian, Mathematics, and Nature and Society classes opens up the possibility for teachers to modernize and improve the quality of teaching and adjust their teaching methodology to suit students' needs and abilities, which would significantly contribute to the neutralization of the shortcomings of traditional education (Bojović, 2012). Still, it is necessary to encourage teachers to use educational standards more frequently and incorporate them into remedial and supplementary classes, as the use of educational standards allows for a differentiated approach to teaching. Based on their assessments of student achievement levels, teachers can always adjust the demands to better suit their students. This approach further ensures the monitoring of student progress based on a system of demands and clearly defined achievements, with a firm grounding for teachers' assessments (Maričić, 2012).

According to our participants' opinions, the greatest contribution of educational standards to lower primary education was reflected in the possibility to monitor student progress (74.4% of participants chose this response). One in five teachers thought that the greatest contribution of educational standards pertained to objectivity in grading (20.7%), while a negligible percentage of participants believed that educational standards

most greatly contributed to school self-evaluation (2.4%). A minute percentage (2.4%) of responses fell into the Other category.

The obtained data on ways of documenting the use of educational standards revealed that nearly one-third of teachers documented the application of educational standards within the operative plan (31.7%), while more than one-fifth of teachers used written class preparations as pedagogical documentation on the use of educational standards (22%). The application of educational standards was less commonly documented within the electronic gradebook (14.6%), annual teaching plan (13.4%), and pedagogical notebook (11%), while the smallest percentage of participants used the school program (6.1%) and student portfolios (1.2%). When assigning a numerical grade, more than a half of the participants (56.1%) also noted which standards the student had adopted.

The results of this study showed that most of the teachers often (31.7%) or regularly (39%) applied educational standards in the devising of their teaching plans. This practice certainly contributes to the realization of the key goal of the application of knowledge standards, which is allowing all students to acquire functional, exemplary, and transferable knowledge by the time they finish primary school (Mikanović, 2014). A small number of teachers (about 10%) stated that they applied educational standards rarely or not at all, while 20% of them reported occasionally using the standards when devising their plans. This finding could be interpreted as their unacceptance of the standards, which resulted in insufficient application. It further indicates that these participants did not see educational standards as a professional tool that could increase their ability to offer higher-quality education to their students (Baucal, 2013).

We sought to determine whether the amount of work experience and the education level teachers possessed were linked to their opinions on the function and significance of educational standards in the general improvement of lower primary education. The chi-square test values did not indicate that teachers' work experience and education were linked to the way they applied educational standards for the given subject, their opinions on the contribution of educational standards to lower primary education, or the ways they documented the application of educational standards within pedagogical documentation. The chi-square test revealed a statistically significant correlation between years of work experience and the frequency of application of educational standards in the preparation of teaching plans. Namely, the application

of educational standards in the preparation of teaching plans was significantly more common among teachers who had more than 26 years of work experience in comparison to their younger colleagues ($\chi^2=15.47$, $df=6$, $p<.05$). No link was found between teachers' educational backgrounds and the application of educational standards when devising teaching plans.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that educational standards constitute a unique instrument of the state through which it governs education and enhances its success and efficiency. Observing the role of educational standards in education reform processes in the Republic of Serbia, we can conclude that while the basic prerequisites for the development and application of standards do exist, there is still a conspicuous lack of clear mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring the quality of all the necessary steps in the process (Pešikan, 2012). Likewise, the experiences of the key actors in the process have not been sufficiently researched as of yet.

Therein lies the contribution of our analysis, which showed that teachers more frequently applied educational standards in regular classes in comparison to remedial and supplementary classes, found that educational standards most greatly contributed to student progress monitoring, and most commonly used educational standards when working on teaching plans and class preparation. The presented results were somewhat expected, having in mind the validity of the assumption that educational standards have positive effects, primarily in terms of changes in the planning and organization of class teaching, along with the evaluation of student work. Furthermore, even though the obtained results cannot be generalized due to limitations stemming from sample size, we believe that our research sample was large enough to draw preliminary conclusions about the role of educational standards in lower primary education in general, taking into consideration the perspective of teachers.

The results of this research indicate that the Serbian education system still faces various challenges in the application of educational standards of achievement, in spite of their decade-long use. Therefore, the function of educational standards should enjoy

greater attention across the domains of research, education policy, and teaching practice (both at the school and classroom levels).

Key words: educational standards of achievement, the Serbian education system, lower primary education, class teachers, students.

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