

## THE MODERN GENERAL EDUCATION IN SERBIA

Assist. Prof. Dr. Vesna Z. MINIĆ  
Faculty for Teachers, Prizren – Leposavić,  
University of Kosovska Mitrovica,  
SERBIA

### ABSTRACT

General education, as an integral part of human education in general, provides a formative basis on which foundations human personality is entirely built. It can be acquired at various institutions and in different situations. However, the most organized forms of general education are obtained in primary schools, specially organized institutions of knowledge, experience and the like. The knowledge necessary to every human being is acquired in these institutions regardless of which specific occupations and avocation (profession) she or he deals with. It is “a passport for life” which allows people to choose what to do for a living, to take on a part of building a common future and to continue learning. It is, as such, a preparation for life and it should be organized in a way that it provides everyone without exceptions an opportunity to express their entire creative potential.

The contents of contemporary general education are being changed with the development of human society. They follow changes, in a certain society, caused by the development of industry, engineering, technology, information technology, political structures and others. In order to be able to follow all these changes, we need a broad range of knowledge and skills in a field of human life and work and even beyond that, which we will study in this paper. The subject of interest in this paper will be contemporary primary education, the factors that affect it, the content structure of general education and their ultimate effects.

**Key Words:** Primary schools, general education, changes, Serbia.

### INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

If a man wants to be successful in the society where he lives and works, he needs to acquire knowledge from different fields of: science, culture, art, language, social life, engineering, technology, work, relationships among people, sport, and etc. This kind of knowledge is called general knowledge and the education that comprehends knowledge in these fields is general education.

Human personality is being built entirely through general education. It represents an important basis on which all subsequent knowledge, abilities and skills are built because it follows almost all civilization heritages and scientific achievements needed to every human regardless the profession he or she goes into. Thus, it is said that this is “a passport for life” which provides a man with a possibility to choose what to do for a living as well as a possibility to independently create his own future.

General education is often equated with culture, so that it is a quite common case to find also a term universal-cultural education or general culture in literature. These two terms are interrelated and intertwined because general education serves as a carrier of culture on one hand and on the other culture is a cornerstone of a society.

Presently, general education in Serbia is faced by some new and different tasks of preparing young people for living and working in informational and technologically, not only changeable but unstable, unpredictable,

uncertain and demanding conditions. In the rapidly changing world in which knowledge is more complex and expands every day and information sources unfathomable multiply; data, information and fact can become irrelevant and obsolete before they are used. Having in mind the fact that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of knowledge when numerous progressive changes will appear in schools and general education, special attention must be paid exactly on the adoption and expansion of knowledge from various areas of human life and work.

#### **FUNDAMENTALS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN SERBIA**

Regarding the general education development in Serbia, it is influenced as well as the world by numerous social changes which have altered its course and progress. In our country there are general education schools at the first and second level of education. Primary school is at the first level, which provides students with general education necessary for every person living in a modern society no matter whether he or she will later continue their education or go for work professions, it is compulsory for all citizens from seven to fifteen years of age and it lasts eight years. At the second level of schooling which lasts for four years, there is a gymnasium in addition to vocational schools as the school of general education in which student's level of general education is substantially expanded.

General education in Serbia today is experiencing a number of changes due to numerous changes incurred in our society, particularly in recent decades, as a result of its overall development. Innovations are brought by numerous reform attempts in order to eliminate current deficiencies in general education as a whole. In this direction, the principles, objectives and expected outcomes of education are defined in our country. The basic principles, on which mentioned reform endeavors are built, are:

- 1) Decentralization,
- 2) Democratization,
- 3) De-politicization (The Ministry of Education, 2004).

Decentralization implies a greater degree of school autonomy, which is a basic unit of internationalized education, in normative planning and organizing one's life and work as well as educational and cultural-educational activities in the community where it operates. "When schools increase control over their destiny it brings them many benefits (Stoll and Fink, 2000)". The decentralization of educational system in Serbia is one of the key issues of educational system reform and all segments related to its functioning. It applies to: education accessibility (involvement of all categories of children and citizens living in Serbia in the process of education, regardless social and economic status of their family, religion and special needs for special education program organization); education (refers to acquiring the appropriate degree of student's knowledge at all level of education) and the democratization of educational process (provides the active participation of all relevant and interested stakeholders in the educational process-parents, teachers, students, government representatives and others).

Democratization defines a law, guarantee, real possibility and opportunity that every citizen can acquire any level or type of education under the same and equal terms in all schools and non-school institutions. Democratization implies: acceptance and respect of (democratic) values: freedom, responsibility, equality, solidarity, dignity, etc. as well as making and adherence to (democratic) principles and procedures in decision making and practical action: tolerance, dialogue, debate, non-discrimination and others. In short, democracy in education implies two principles: the principle of equality (fairness, accessibility, and respect of the rights regardless of gender, age, racial, ethical and religious affiliation, place of living and financial status, ability and health status) and the principle of participation (the freedom of expressing, having an opinion, choice and active participation in decision making and in educational practice with accepting responsibility). "The preparation for active participation in the community life becomes, for education, a task which is increasingly recognized as democratic principles spread more and more in the world (Delor, 1996)".

De-politicization is the legal disabling of political engagement for members of social organizations or institutions which are expected to be politically impartial. This means that a school as an educational institution should be beyond the influence of political events in the country.

### **GENERAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS**

General education in the Republic of Serbia includes: the compulsory general secondary education and the general-educational segment of secondary vocational education. Considering that general education is overall a very important lever of human education and it is present from the very beginning to the end of schooling, in this paper, we will attempt to introduce it in certain stages of schooling. "A school in the current development of human society was one of the main roads for acquiring education, preparing various personnel for different activities, and in its previous duration it was constantly exposed to changes and transformations (Djordjevic, 2000)". One very important need is just general education because its significance is growing and "general education becomes increasingly necessary for more and more people as such and even broader (Bakovljevic, 2003)".

### **GENERAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

A primary school is a main unit of a society and as such it is an institution of special national significance. "Education in primary schools is the basis and precondition of mastering the modern contents of general education, socializing the young generations, developing intellectual abilities and student's morality (Jovanovic, 1004)". It is a magnifying glass of our time, a mirror of a society we live and work in.

Obligation, gratuity, general educational character, accessibility and equality are the basic principles on which primary and compulsory education in Serbia is founded. Primary education is the right of every child, regardless of gender, race, nationality, social status, intellectual ability and religion.

General education goes on the curriculum which every school brings in accordance with certain documents prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

Compulsory primary education is intended for everyone with no exceptions. In the most developed countries it lasts for ten, eleven or twelve years, with a tendency to extend its duration. It lasts eight years in Serbia, although there were attempts during 2003 to extend it to nine-year primary education (3+3+3 system). This limit shift for one year was to emphasize the importance of general education for the internal developments of individuals as well as the quality of educating as many young people for the overall social progress. Considering the fact that it proved ineffective (for our country at this stage of social and school development), compulsory primary education was returned on eight years again.

Such education is realized through the school program by which we imply: all the contents, processes and activities aimed at achieving the objectives and outcomes of education, as prescribed and regulated both at the State (central) and the school (local) level. For these and similar definitions another term is also used, known to the pedagogic public as a curriculum. "Curriculum is usually consisted of studied subjects (Marsh J. Colin, 1994)". The curriculum, in fact, represents comprehensive course of education. General education programs try to cover as many areas and they are often overloaded with complex contents and contents of secondary importance, because they do not take account of the knowledge economy instead of choosing basic facts and major ideas.

The curriculum in the primary general education in Serbia ought to include several components: it must involve system of knowledge, skills and habits of some areas of study (literature and language, art culture, an

understanding of nature and society, health and hygiene education), establishing the baseline for independent (individual) learning, ethic bases and lifestyle, emotional-valuable attitudes towards nature and other people. The personality of a child is being prepared through the adoption of the curriculum for the maintenance and culture development (in the broad sense). Therefore, the curriculum ought to originate from various sources in primary school already: science, technology, manufacturing, and culture, understanding nature, understanding people, pedagogical and psychological knowledge. In every respect, when choosing curriculum related to general education in primary schools one should not strive for maximum criterion (everything a child could acquire), he or she should examine how certain curriculum corresponds to certain age, what curriculum provides as a base for further development and what are the possible alternatives for its involvement in the teaching process.

### GENERAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Secondary schools in Serbia (secondary education; среднее образование) are post-primary schools of second level and they are consisted of "schools, institutions, forms and educational programs which are placed between primary and high education (Potkonjak, 1997)".

Secondary education in Serbia lasts two, three or four years and it is subsequently implemented in: general-educational secondary schools (gymnasium) that last four years; and secondary vocational schools (including art schools) that last two, three or four years (as required even more).

After the completion of general secondary education students take a general final exam which allows the transition to a higher level of education; and after the completion of secondary vocational education students are allowed to be involved in the work process or to move on a higher level of education. It is often said that general secondary education is the intersection of life, a gate through which one enters into the social and economic progress. It ought to prepare young people in order to engage themselves more easily in the mature period of life, i.e. to prepare themselves for their working (professional) activity. Thus, the common elements that make up the core (languages, natural sciences, general knowledge) ought to be enriched and modernized to reflect the increasing "globalization of the phenomenon, the need for intercultural understanding and science usage in promoting human development (Delor, 1996)". In other words, more attention should be paid on the quality and preparation for life in the rapidly changing world, in the world that is often prevailed by technology and high technique in all spheres of human activities. "Contemporary secondary general education is focused on the education of a humane person, ... and it is necessary for future special (professional) man's preparation, for the man who is able to actively participate in communication and simultaneously aspires towards inner spiritual life, towards his attitudes management (Lihacev, 2000)". Namely, the period of development of young people who are involved in general secondary education, is one of the most turbulent and controversial period of personality development. "Secondary education convergence to the wider population of young people, in all countries with developed system of upbringing and education, and in our as well, asks questions of the construction of different models of secondary schools which regarding their contents, organization, technology and work forms satisfy individual needs and possibilities of the wider population of the Youth, but also the social objectives in the prospect of present and future (Potkonjak, 1988)". Additionally, the fact that the choice of future occupation is questioned in this period and therefore it plays a very complex role, which makes it an inseparable link of entire system of education. The right choice of profession, a choice of the right way is important because it "will allow us to maximally fulfill our working potentials and to satisfy our needs and desires (Minic, 2009)".

General secondary education is an integral part of the education system (particularly institutional) through which all the core issues, from primary (basic) to high education, are intertwined.

## THE STRUCTURE OF GENERAL EDUCATION CONTENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

General education contents are very important because they ought to stimulate students, to encourage them to research, to ask relevant questions, to engage themselves in a process of creative studies in different areas within carefully selected and accurate data and information. General education contents must be flexible and, as such, they must prepare students for practical application. They must also take into account the effects of various changes to the growing multiplication of facts and data. This will require more involvement of novelty, and because of the fact that general education contents will have to change more and faster in response to newly discovered information and the extend of our knowledge in relation to which we decide what, how and how much should be changed. Since general and compulsory education is the beginning of a process of continuous and lifelong learning, and we are aware that it cannot provide the development of exactly everyone and just all knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for active living in a community and the advance and progression on the individual plan, then it should develop the overall disposition, ability, openness and willingness to learn. For such process, it is necessary to provide adequate contents in the curriculum by which the said will be realized. In the curriculum conception, teaching and education are assumed as processes that affect the whole personality of a student. "A quality curriculum is one that, among the others, enables the harmonious development of all aspects of students' personalities (The Ministry of Education, 2003)".

Contemporary conception of teaching concept choice emphasizes the role of basic and essential knowledge required for all students. This knowledge is basic because it provides foundation that will be later supplemented and enriched with new and more complex knowledge, and essential because it provides effective learning in the social and cultural life, which is the right and need of every individual.

A curriculum is presently consisted of general and particular part and it presents a unique unit where general and particular parts are functionally adjusted to each other.

The general part in lower grades of compulsory primary education includes: primary (basic) subjects; compulsory subjects and optional subjects.

Higher grades of compulsory primary education include: primary subjects; compulsory subjects; and some optional subjects.

The particular part of a curriculum includes: optional courses, contents and activities through which schools, in accordance with their capabilities, satisfy the specific needs, benefits and interests of their students, parents and local community; and some optional subjects and facultative subjects, contents and activities through which schools, in accordance with their capabilities, satisfy the specific needs, benefits and interests of their students, parents and local community.

Subject teaching is done through: primary subjects (which are compulsory for every student in all grades of compulsory primary education); compulsory subjects (which are compulsory for every student in particular grades of primary education); optional subjects (which are compulsory for those students who choose them in particular grades); and facultative subjects (subjects which schools offer in a particular part of a curriculum and grade).

Today, there is a possibility of making differentiated curriculum for older students of primary schools which are designed for students with different interests, abilities and aspirations in individual subjects. "Since there are no conditions for "one student-one curriculum", experts opt for differentiated curriculum with three levels (elementary, intermediate and advance) (Kocic, 1984)".

Curricula at the earliest stage of primary education are accomplished through the class teaching where the focus is on the development of basic abilities, knowledge and skills. During this period, the process of systematic education relies on the experiences, knowledge and skills which a child has acquired and built up in other contents and conditions of daily pre-school and out of school life. In this part of education, teaching of primary, compulsory and optional subjects is accomplished within 90% of the prescribed number of classes. The remaining 10% is planned for the realization of the particular part of a school curriculum, which is also required.

At the next stage of primary education, children perform a large number of operations and they have various contextual knowledge. Abstract abilities and potentials, however, have not reached yet the level of full logical abstraction so the range of acknowledging is limited mostly on the concrete, realistic, material. Therefore, in the teaching process it is started with the phenomenon close to a child, conditions are made and the child is encouraged to explore them in different ways and to reveal them in new contexts and under various conditions and thus he or she integrates all his or her new experiences into already known. During this period, the focus is on enriching and expanding and also integrating the already existing knowledge. In this part of education, teaching the primary, compulsory and some optional subjects is realized within 80% of the prescribed number of classes. The remaining 20% is planned for teaching some optional subjects and the school curriculum implementation, which is also required.

The final stage of primary education corresponds to the entrance of acknowledging abilities into the final, the most developed stage, i.e. forming abilities of abstract thinking. It allows the understanding and developing concepts and conceptual systems and managing the system of basic scientific knowledge. At this age, students are able to master the patterns of thought, research and problem solving specific to certain disciplines that will be later used in further studies. In this part of primary education, teaching the primary, compulsory and some optional subjects is realized within 70% of the prescribed number of classes. The remaining 30% is planned for teaching some optional subjects and the school curriculum implementation, which is also required.

Content areas of general education in primary schools in Serbia, are grouped in the following way: the Educational Area of Language, Literature and Communication; the Educational Area of Social Sciences and Philosophy; the Educational Area of Mathematics, Natural Science and Technology; the Educational Area of Art; the Educational Area of Physical Education and Health Education. *The Area of Language, Literature and Communication* is a very important part of general education. Knowledge in this area is acquired by native and foreign language, while one must have in mind that the knowledge acquired in this area represents the necessary basis for teaching and learning in other areas. When studying the language, it is important to acquire language skills: listening, speaking, writing, which are interconnected. Learning one skill helps learning the other etc. *The Educational Area of Social Science and Philosophy* provides knowledge and builds skills, attitudes and values required for the development of humane, tolerant, harmonious and intercultural oriented persons, who are capable of coping with complex conditions of a society, and capable of contributing the development of their community as a responsible citizen. By acknowledging the past and present societies, cultures and their diverse heritages, the student will notice the important phenomena and processes that influence the creation of man and society in different periods and places. He or she will simultaneously study: human's psychic life, the structure of thought and knowledge, aspects of social and cultural interaction and communication, various forms of social communities and institutions, customs, norms, values and beliefs upon which they rely. *The Educational Area of Mathematics, Natural Science and Technology*: Mathematics, as a subject of general education, is essential to everyone. It is almost impossible to find an activity which does not require elementary mathematical knowledge and skills. Today's living conditions dictate such a situation that one cannot go anywhere without mathematical knowledge, not even outside the workplace. It is an integral element of all sciences and any business. Mathematics helps developing logical thinking, the perception of regularity and symmetry (which is essential while planning) and developing abilities to calculate, to estimate and logically respond. The study of nature, the diversity of elements in it, the parts it consists of, is a basis acquired in our

educational system in the lower grades of compulsory general education, the subject *the World around Us*. As regards technology, it should be noted that it is creative and practice oriented usage of human skills, in order to solve some various problems. It permeates our daily lives, both at home and workplace, so it is necessary that all students develop technological skills needed in the world they live. *The Educational Areas Art*: Arts offer a natural framework for unhindered research, research and communication. They have always had a great significance in communicating and understanding the world around us. As emotions, intellect and imagination are released through the art, their importance is enormous. *The Educational Area of Physical Education and Health Education* is also an important part of general education which implies that students acquire knowledge, abilities, skills and values necessary for the preservation and promotion of health and healthy lifestyles. The main objective of this area is to build up a proper attitude towards health. Physical activities cannot be replaceable or compensated for other area activities, which makes this area unique and certainly infallible component of quality general education. Varied and rich physical activities have stimulating effect on students. These activities should be well designed, they should include interesting, diverse and entertaining contents, which will create a favorable atmosphere and thus become their own aim, because they should really be a source of comfort and satisfaction for students.

The existence of these educational areas systematically establishes horizontal and vertical connection within the curriculum, by which: certain content repetition is avoided, it is allowed that related contents from a number of subjects are managed together (time-aligned) and the teaching content is adapted to the age characteristics and students' needs etc.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on the presented, it can be concluded that the importance of general education is enormous. Suffice to say that general education knowledge has become the driving force for socio-economic and cultural development of each country. It comprehends all aspects of human life and work and influences the satisfaction of many human needs.

The compliance of general education with the development of science, engineering, technology, etc. is a social and pedagogical issue of a great importance. It is because, first of all, we live in an age dominated by turbulent changes such as: rapid development of science, informational engineering, microelectronics, robotics, etc. that change the role and importance of human factor in general. All these changes are the part of our general education and overall culture of every man.

General education in Serbia is present from the beginning to the end of schooling. In primary schools, it is done on the curriculum level whose structures must have the integrative character (structures covering the widest fields of human thought). The existence of these educational areas considerably facilitates educational work in primary schools, it has the stimulating effect on students and it is adaptable to their needs and age characteristics. General education in Serbia is now given special attention since its contents comprehend the widest fields of human thoughts; they enrich human life and contribute to the quality of personal and professional development.

**IJONTE's Note:** This article was presented at 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on New Trends in Education and Their Implications - ICONTE, 26-28 April, 2012, Antalya-Turkey and was selected for publication for Volume 3 Number 3 of IJONTE 2012 by IJONTE Scientific Committee.

#### BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESS OF AUTHOR



Vesna Z. MINIC is the Professor Assistant in the Faculty for Teacher's training in Leposavic – Prizren, in which she has been working for twelve years until now. Her occupational field is pedagogy, specifically the general pedagogy. In this frame of work, she is researching the questions of general education in Serbia and other countries, its characteristics, tendencies in development, application of innovations ect. On the same faculty, from 2008 she has been working as the coordinator for working and cooperating with kindergartens where she is gaining significant results and advancing the educational process on the department for educators of preschool institutions.

Dr Vesna Minic is the author of several scientific articles and participant of national and international conferences.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Vesna Z. MINIĆ  
Faculty for Teachers, Prizren – Leposavić,  
University of Kosovska Mitrovica  
SERBIA  
E. Mail: [minic.vesna@gmail.com](mailto:minic.vesna@gmail.com)

#### REFERENCES

- Bakovljević, M., (2003). *Основи педагогике*, The Faculty of Teacher Education, Сомбор.
- Delor, Z., (1996). *Образовање скривена ризница*, The Ministry of Education and Sport, Belgrade.
- Djordjevic, J. (2000) *Реформни педагошки покрети у XX веку*, Science book, Belgrade.
- Jovanovic, B.(2004) *Школа и васпитање*, The Faculty of Teacher Education, Jagodina.
- Kocic, Lj. (1984) *Мogućности примене диференцираних наставних програма у основној школи*, Pedagogical Reform of School, Belgrade.
- Lihacev, B. (2000) *Педагогика*, Юрайт, Moscow.
- Marsh, J. Colin.(1994) *Курикулум*, Eduka, Zagreb.
- The Ministry of Education and Sport, (2004). *Квалитетно образовање за све – изазови реформе образовања у Србији*, The Ministry of Education and Sport, Belgrade.
- Minic, V. (2009) *Formalno izobraževanje na šolah za pridobitev sekundarne stopnje izobrazbe v Srbiji*, Iskanja, Kranj.
- Potkonjak, N. (1988), *Kuda ide srednje obrazovanje*, *Педагогика*, No. 2, The Association of Pedagogical Societies, Belgrade.
- Potkonjak, N. (1997). *Педагошки тезаурус*, The Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Materials, Belgrade.
- Stoll, L. Fink, D.(2000). *Мијењајмо наше школе*, Eduka, Zagreb.