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## Parents' Attitudes toward and Level of Information about Private and Alternative Schools

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### Abstract

The aim of this study refers to the understanding of parents' attitudes towards private and alternative schools. The sample consists of 189 parents. The applied instrument consists of the assessment scale of distinctive features of private schools vs. public schools, as well as questions about the level of information about alternative pedagogical concepts. Results indicate that the respondents believe that there are no significant differences between private and public schools, and they are not informed enough about various alternative pedagogical concepts. It may be concluded that work on the promotion of school choice, as parents' right, is very important.

**Keywords:** *alternative schools, democratization of society, pedagogical and school pluralism, private schools*

### Introduction

Continuous expansion of democratization of education, which especially influenced the development of education in the twentieth century, was a general trend in terms of increasing the diverse offers of educational contents, methods and forms of work, as well as the organization of potentials to choose different ways that lead to acquiring the required education (Ridl, 2003). Today, this tendency is expressed by creating conditions for the exercise of pedagogical and school pluralism that is associated with the operation of private and alternative schools.

According to the most common interpretations, the concept of *private education* specifies a form of education that is established and financed by an individual, non-governmental body or an association that is subject to the relevant laws (Eurydice European Unit, 2000). In that sense, private education is provided in private schools, which may, but need not, be different in the content or methods of education in relation to public schools, since they are an alternative to public schools only in the criteria of establishing and financing. On the other hand, *alternative education* implies education that is different from the dominant educational flows represented by the state, and it may be implemented both in private and public schools. The priority criterion for the definition of the term “alternative school” is the pedagogical specificity of a particular educational institution. Seen in this context, alternative schools are the schools that are characterized by: education focused on the child and his/her individuality; a comprehensive development of students’ potentials; an innovative and flexible curriculum which is based on students’ needs and interests; partnership in education; active participation of students, parents and stakeholders in school life and school development, etc. (Krbec, 1999; Milutinović & Zuković, 2013; Ridl, 2003; Spevak, 2001). Therefore, when a school (either private or public) operates according to the concepts of the reform pedagogy, or has a qualitatively different approach to the educational process, then it is defined as an alternative school.

Today, there is a wide range of practices in the exercise of pedagogical and school pluralism in most countries of the European Union, while the opportunities to choose among different schools, either within the state system or between the public and private school offers, are the rule rather than an exception. Thereby, the viewpoints in terms of reliance on free market mechanisms in education are polarized and very subjective. The literature states (Sliwka & Istance, 2006) that the opponents of private schools argue that acceptance of the school choice policy allows for a possibility for some students to get a better education than others, and that an introduction of the market-based approach in education abandons its most important function, which is reflected in the transfer of common cultural values of the national interest. The literature also points out that the positions opposite to the smooth parental choice of a school are based on the belief that education is not a “commodity”, but the public good which helps society to achieve its goals (Savićević, 2000), and that the introduction of free-market principles to the field of education further intensifies the existing class and social inequalities (Boyd, 2005). On the other hand, there is a widespread belief according to which the choice of a school is an important device for improving the quality of education. Thus, the literature suggests that

school choice supporters believe that the implementation of the school choice policy introduces a diversity in a uniform education system; solves the problem of mediocrity in public education; encourages the involvement of parents in the education of their own children; increases educational opportunities for some poor, i.e., deprived students; respects large differences in students' abilities, needs and goals, and allows multi-ethnic communities to preserve and promote their culture and tradition (Boyd, 2005). Thereby, most arguments supporting the school choice are based on the standpoint that the possibility to choose is a fundamental principle of a pluralistic democratic society.

The issue of school choice remains somewhat conflicted at the empirical level. Previous experiences from Europe and the United States suggest that school choice has a tendency to increase the educational gap between the privileged and underprivileged (Ambler, 1994; Butler & van Zanten, 2007). Some studies (Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2006) emphasize that different levels of information affect the choice of a school, depending on parents' income. Although differences in the awareness of a possible school choice are not large, there is a significant difference in the selection of schools. Parents with lower income more frequently enroll their children in a school which is closer to their place of residence, which is attended by their friends' children, and which provides a higher level of safety for children, while they are less interested in the quality provided by the school in the academic sense.

On the other hand, studies show that parents perceive differences among schools of different quality. They tend to choose a "better" school for their children, regardless of whether it is defined through academic results, or the social context (Hirsch, 2002). This supports the understanding that the policy of school choice creates a relationship of competition among schools, which can lead to the improvement of education quality. Research results indicate that higher satisfaction with a school is present in parents who have already actively participated in the choice of the school (Randall, 1994), and it is shown that the parents of higher social status and education actively select schools (Goldhaber, 1999; Walford, 1996). Research (Sliwka & Istance, 2006) confirms that parents' involvement in their children's school activities is increased in private schools. Some studies (Coleman & White, as cited in: Randall, 1994) suggest that, due to parents' active involvement, students of private schools are more likely to receive appropriate education. Other studies (Henig, 1994) undoubtedly show that parents' choice of a school strongly influences the parents' satisfaction, responding both to their expectations in terms of pedagogical solutions and to their sense of empowerment in terms of decision-making about their own children.

Taking all this into consideration, it could be concluded that the views on the issue of school choice are mutually opposed and that the results of research in this field are interpreted in very different ways. However, the fact is that the choice of a school already exists in practice and that it is currently widely accepted as a pedagogical and political option. When it comes to the situation in Serbia, development of pedagogical and school pluralism, seen through the prism of the operation of private and alternative schools, is still in its infancy. Therefore, in addition to the theoretical analysis of experiences of European countries in this area, there is a need for examining the attitudes of different stakeholders in Serbia, especially parents, as direct participants in school choice.

## **Research Methodology**

The aim of the research was related to the consideration of parents' attitudes and the level of information about private and alternative schools. Accordingly, the following research objectives were operationalized: 1. Examine parents' attitude toward distinctive features of private schools in relation to public schools; 2. Check the level of information about alternative pedagogical conceptions; 3. Examine parents' attitude toward the need to increase the number of alternative schools in Serbia; 4. Examine the existence of statistically significant differences in parents' responses depending on the measured socio-demographic features.

The applied instrument designed for the requirements of this study consists of two parts. In addition to questions on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (level of education and estimated financial status of the family), the first part of the instrument consists of an evaluation scale (11 items) of distinctive features of private schools in relation to public schools, where the answers are offered on a three-level scale (1 – I disagree; 2 – there is no difference; 3 – I agree). The second part of the instrument is related to the issues on self-assessment of the level of information about alternative pedagogical concepts (Montessori pedagogy, Freinet pedagogy, Decroly pedagogy, Steiner pedagogy and Step-by-step methodology), while the responses are given on the four-point Likert scale (1 – not at all; 2 – little; 3 – much; 4 – very much). This part of the instrument includes the question about a need to increase the number of alternative schools in Serbia. In addition to three offered answers (1 – no; 2 – I am undecided; 3 – yes), there is also an option where respondents could explain their arguments for the selected answer.

The sample consisted of 189 parents of elementary school children who attended public schools. It was a sample of convenience, and the research was

carried out in three public schools in the territory of the City of Novi Sad. Within descriptive statistics, there were measured average values (arithmetic mean) and dispersion of results measures (standard deviation). Factor analysis was applied to examine the latent structure of the measured variables, while t-test and  $\chi^2$  test were applied in order to analyze the statistical significance of differences.

## Research Results

*Distinctive Features of Private Schools Compared to Public Schools.* Results of the factor analysis Scale of distinctive features of private schools have shown that it is a one-dimensional scale (the percentage of explained variance of the first isolated component is 35.31, and the other is markedly lower, i.e., 12.31), which is shown by the correlation of items with the first principal component, which is over .30 (Table 1). A high level of internal consistency of the items was established (Alpha coefficient is 0.81).

**Table 1.** Factor analysis of the scale on distinctive features of private schools vs. public schools

	Items	Component
10.	Communication between teachers and parents is better in private schools.	.677
7.	In private schools, children learn more foreign languages.	.669
3.	Private schools open more opportunities for introduction of innovation in the educational process organization.	.633
9.	Children with problems are better disciplined in private schools.	.625
8.	Private schools are more focused on the development of social sensitivity and tolerance among students.	.620
4.	Parents are more involved in the school life and work in private schools.	.616
5.	Private schools are characterized by greater care for the child before and after school.	.586
11.	Children gain better computer literacy in private schools.	.576
6.	Private schools are more focused on healthy diet and sports activities.	.574
2.	Private schools have better conditions for work with children with developmental disorders.	.537
1.	Private schools provide better quality work due to a small number of students in classes.	.359

The obtained average score at the level of the entire scale ( $M=2.36$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ) showed that the parents thought that there were no significant differences between private and public schools, whereby they gave a slight advantage to some features to

private schools. A detailed view of descriptive statistics for each item showed that the majority of the parents believed that the priority of private schools compared to public schools was reflected in the feature related to *A foreign language learning* ( $M=2.6$ ), *Class size* ( $M=2.5$ ), *Conditions for work with children with developmental disabilities* ( $M=2.5$ ), as well as the opportunity to *Gain computer literacy* ( $M=2.5$ ). On the other hand, the results showed that the majority of the parents were of the opinion that there was no difference between private and public schools in the area of *Disciplining problematic children* ( $M=2.0$ ) and the *Development of social sensitivity and tolerance in students* ( $M=2.0$ ).

*Parents' level of information about alternative pedagogical concepts.* A determined value of arithmetic mean of the obtained responses ( $M=1.6$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ) showed that the majority of the parents thought that they were very little informed about alternative pedagogical concepts.

**Table 2.** Parents' level of information about alternative pedagogical concepts

Alternative pedagogical concept	Responses						M	SD
	1	2	3	4	No answer			
Montessori pedagogy	44.4%	31.7%	14.8%	2.1%	6.9%	1.7	0.8	
Step-by-step	37.6%	36.5%	14.3%	4.8%	6.9%	1.9	0.9	
Steiner pedagogy	59.8%	25.4%	5.3%	1.1%	8.5%	1.4	0.7	
Decroly pedagogy	60.8%	26.5%	4.2%	1.1%	7.4%	1.4	0.6	
Freinet pedagogy	61.4%	26.5%	3.2%	1.1%	7.9%	1.4	0.6	

The obtained average scores (Table 2) showed that the parents were informed to a small extent about the Step-by-step methodology and Montessori pedagogy, while the obtained average scores in three remaining alternative pedagogical concepts showed that the greatest number of parents was not informed about them.

*A need to increase the number of alternative schools in Serbia.* Based on the obtained average score ( $M=1.9$ ,  $SD=0.7$ ), it is possible to conclude that most parents are hesitant about the need to increase the number of alternative schools (46%). About 30% of the parents think that there is no need to increase the number of alternative schools in Serbia, while about 24% of the parents show a positive attitude towards this issue.

*Differences in the parents' responses depending on the measured socio-demographic characteristics.* The results showed that statistically significant differences were identified only in the questions related to the level of the parents' level of

information about alternative pedagogical concepts, considering the level of their education. Namely, it was determined that there were statistically significant differences in the level of information about Step-by-step methodology ( $t(174) = -2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ), whereby the parents of a higher level of education ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) were more informed than the parents of a lower level of education ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ). Also, it was found that there were marginally significant differences in the level of information about Steiner pedagogy ( $t(171) = -1.68$ ,  $p = .09$ ) in the same way in which the parents with higher levels of education earn higher scores ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) than the parents with lower levels of education ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ).

## **Discussion**

Although our research was conducted on a sample of convenience, which did not allow for generalization of the obtained findings, the presented research results are probably the result of the general situation of (un)operation of the school and educational pluralism in Serbia. Namely, the obtained findings show that the majority of the surveyed parents do not observe significant differences between private and public schools. While the literature (Cox & Witko, 2008) emphasizes that private schools are less bureaucratic and have a greater degree of autonomy, which results in more pleasant settings for the increased involvement of parents in school activities, the results of our research show that 50% of the surveyed parents think that there is no difference between private and public schools either in terms of parents' involvement in school work or in terms of the quality of communication between teachers and parents. However, the surveyed parents do give a slight advantage to private schools for particular characteristics (class size, gaining computer literacy, learning foreign languages and work with children with developmental disorders). Since the sample includes parents whose children attend a public school, their attitudes probably result from indirectly obtained information on the work of private educational institutions in our country. On the other hand, the responses given by the surveyed parents potentially suggest that the tendency of development of private compulsory education in Serbia is similar to the situation in which the education systems of certain countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland) were in the early nineties of the twentieth century, when the organizers of private schools tended to limit the number of children in the class, to individualize teaching and intensify foreign language learning (Klus-Stanska & Olek, 1998; Kozakiewicz, 1992; Sliwka & Istance, 2006).

Taking into consideration that the alternative education in Serbia is still in its infancy and that an important precondition for the operation of alternative schools is parents well informed about the work programs of such schools, our research included the issue related to the parents' self-assessment of the level of information about certain alternative pedagogical concepts that are most prevalent in Western education systems. The results show that the majority of the parents emphasize that they are little or not informed about the alternative pedagogical conceptions. Thereby, it is shown that the parents of a higher level of education are more informed than the parents of a lower level of education, which is in line with the results of the research carried out in the United States (Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2006). The obtained data have certain similarities with the results of the research conducted after about fifteen years of operation of alternative primary schools (two Waldorf schools, and one Montessori school) in the Republic of Croatia (Rajić, 2008), which has shown that parents have very little knowledge about alternative pedagogical concepts.

The parents in our sample were asked a question about the need to increase the number of alternative schools in Serbia. It turned out that the majority of the surveyed parents were undecided about this issue. On the offered opportunity to explain their opinion, the parents stated that one of the key reasons for their irresolution was a lack of information on the functioning of alternative schools. Also, qualitative analysis of the obtained responses showed that the parents largely believed that alternative schools were not available for everyone. They argued that public schools should provide an appropriate quality of education and expressed doubts about the quality of education offered by alternative schools. It seems that the parents' fear that alternative schools provide benefits to children whose parents belong to higher and wealthier classes is not ungrounded because the Law on Primary Education from 2013 (*Službeni glasnik RS*, Br. 55/2013) in Serbia does not prescribe either partial or full cover of the costs of operation of special pedagogical orientation schools by the state. However, the literature (Eurydice European Unit, 2000) indicates different experiences in many countries of the European Union (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland and Sweden), where most private schools are established as an alternative to public education and are supported by the state budget.



## **Conclusions**

It could be said that, in the process of economic transition of Serbia, development of school pluralism, i.e., the establishment of a large number of private and alternative schools is something that is ahead of us. It is currently more realistic in our social and political context of education that the diversity of educational offers is realized through the development of an education policy that provides greater support to the introduction of alternative pedagogical conceptions and their elements into state schools. The obtained results concerning the level of the surveyed parents' information about and attitudes towards private and alternative schools imply a need to intensify efforts to promote school choice as parents' right, as well as the necessity to inform parents about the essence and the nature of different pedagogical concepts. The point is that in the situation of the existence of a diversity of educational offers, the choice could increase the quality of education only if parents make good decisions based on information.

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