

## ATTITUDES OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TOWARDS WORKING WITH COMBINED CLASSES

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**Summary** - *In the educational system of Serbia, combined classes have a significant role, especially in the lower grades of elementary schools. In order to fulfil their educational tasks in such classes, teachers are required not only to have adequate knowledge, but also to possess skills, creativity and a high degree of motivation. The aim of this research was to analyse the attitude of teachers in Serbia towards working in combined classes. The methods applied were descriptive and analytical, and the techniques were field investigation, action investigation and combined techniques. Teachers from Vojvodina (Serbia) took part in the survey. According to the defined tasks, a questionnaire was designed and implemented. The results indicate a high level of motivation by teachers to work in combined classes, but also a low level of appropriate preparation. Their professional training should be improved to enable them to successfully fulfil all the related educational requirements.*

**Key words:** *combined classes, survey, teachers*

### Introduction

A combined class is a class made up of students of two, three or four different classes (of different ages), with whom one teacher works simultaneously in the same classroom (Jukić, 1998). Usually, this term applies to students in the first four grades of elementary school<sup>1</sup>.

In Serbia, there is a long and respectable history of combined classes in elementary education. The first examples of such classes (one classroom, one teacher and students of different ages) were found in monastery schools

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in Serbia even before the 17th century. Combined classes were primarily formed in order to provide education to all children and to enable them to attend school in their home village (and thus reduce the need for them to walk several kilometres to distant schools), but also to organise the education process in the most effective way in terms of staff, space, equipment, and educational and financial resources.

The continuity of education in schools with combined classes has never been interrupted. Such schools are a Serbian reality and tomorrow's need (UNICEF, 2001). It is estimated that at present about 2,000 teachers work in 3,000 elementary schools with combined classes.

The role of the teacher in a combined class is very significant (Špijunović, 2003). His/her professional competence, organisational ability, personal charisma and motivation directly affect the quality of education in combined classes.

Good preparation is the key to success and is the basic prerequisite for efficient and rational work in a combined class (Havelika, 1992).

There are several models of combined classes in Serbian educational practice:

- Combined classes that consist of students of two different age groups. There are several possibilities: for example, we can combine closer ages (I – II or III - IV), and also students with greater age differences (I – III and II – IV);
- Combined classes that include students of three different age groups;
- Combined classes that include students of four different age groups.

## **Research methodology**

### **Objectives**

The quality of education directly depends on the teacher's experience, capability, training and motivation (Lazarević, 1996); thus, it is necessary to analyse the major problems that teachers encounter (Vilotijević, 1995), as well as their attitude towards working in combined classes, with the aim of improving the educational process in small schools.

### **Aims**

The aim of this investigation was to assess teachers' attitudes towards working in combined classes. It was determined to analyse the following areas:

- The influence of institutional education on the performance of teachers in combined classes;
- Teachers' experience in working with combined classes;
- The models for combining classes in the practice of the teachers participating in the present survey;
- Teachers' opinions on the number of students in combined classes;
- Teachers' opinions on students' achievement in combined classes;
- Teachers' opinions on the disadvantages of working with combined classes;
- Teachers' willingness to work with combined classes.

## **Research hypothesis**

The main hypothesis was: Teachers in Serbia have a positive attitude towards working in combined classes, but are not well prepared to do so.

The specific hypotheses were:

1. Teachers have acquired some knowledge on how to work with combined classes during their professional education.
2. The participants of this survey have experience in working with combined classes.
3. During their educational practice, most teachers have worked with various combinations of age groups in combined classes.
4. Most teachers believe that it is better to work with students of a similar age.
5. Teachers agree on the requirement that combined classes should not include more than 20 children.
6. Teachers believe that students in combined classes acquire the same quantum of knowledge as in traditional classes.
7. Teachers are willing to work with combined classes, regardless of the anticipated difficulties.

## **Research methods, techniques, and the research instrument**

This research employed both descriptive and analytical methods. The techniques used were field investigations, action investigation, and combined techniques. The research instrument was a questionnaire constructed on the basis of the set research tasks. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions. The obtained results were statistically processed.

## Sample

A population of 88 teachers from the region of Vojvodina (northern Serbia) participated in the survey.

## Results and discussion

### 1) Duration and structure of teachers' work experience in education

The duration and structure of the teachers' work experience in education are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Teachers' career in education

	Yes		No	
	n	(%)	n	(%)
Have you spent your entire career in education?	77	87.5	11	12.5

Table 2. Structure of teachers' work experience in education (in years)

	up to 5 years (%)	up to 10 years (%)	up to 15 years (%)	up to 20 years (%)	up to 25 years (%)	up to 30 years (%)	up to 35 years (%)	up to 40 years (%)
How long have you worked in education without interruption?	7.55	7.55	11.36	56.81	3.87	4.53	5.30	3.03
How many years (if any) have you worked outside education?	89.39	10.61	0	0	0	0	0	0

Most teachers have spent all their careers in education (Table 2); if they have also worked outside education, these jobs did not last longer than 5 years. Only a small percentage had other jobs for more than 10 years. Most teachers had work experience of 20 years or less.

### 2) Teachers' opinion of their skills in working in combined classes

The teachers' opinions of their skills in working in combined classes are presented in Table 3.

Most teachers believe that they are not sufficiently prepared for working with combined classes, while 31.83% think they are partially skilled.

Only a small percentage of teachers believe that they were provided with adequate knowledge for working with combined classes during their institutional professional education.

Table 3. Influence of institutional education on teachers' skills to work in combined classes

<b>Do you believe that you were helped to work with combined classes during your education?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	10	11.36
No	50	56.81
Partially	28	31.83
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3) Teachers' experience of working with combined classes

Some teachers have had some experience in working with combined classes, but the majority have never worked in such a way. Only a small percentage of teachers were working in a combined class at the time of the survey (Table 4).

Table 4. Teachers' experience of working with combined classes

<b>Have you ever worked in a combined class?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes, I have worked in a combined class before	30	34.09
Yes, I work in such a class at present	16	18.18
No, I have never worked in a combined class	42	47.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>100</b>

### 4) Duration of work in a combined class

Most teachers who have experience with a combined class have spent up to two years working with such classes (30.44%, Table 5). Fewer teachers have worked in a combined class for three years, and even fewer for 5 years or more. No teacher has worked in a combined class for more than 10 years. These data show that teachers are not sufficiently engaged in the organisation of combined classes.

Table 5. Duration of work in a combined class

How long have you worked in a combined class?	n	%
Up to 1 year	14	30.44
Up to 2 years	18	39.13
Up to 3 years	8	17.39
Up to 5 years	2	4.34
Up to 10 years	4	8.70
More than 10 years	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

### 5) Types of combined classes

Most teachers with experience of working in combined class have worked with various two-age combinations (I–II; I–III; II–III; II–IV; II–IV). A small number of teachers have worked with three age groups (4.35%) or even four age groups (4.35%) (Table 6).

Table 6. Types of combined classes

Which classes did you combine?	n	%
I and II class	4	8.69
I and III class	16	34.78
II and IV class	12	26.09
III and IV class	4	8.69
II and III class	6	13.05
Three different classes	2	4.35
Four different classes	2	4.35
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

### 6) Optimal combination of combined classes

In the opinion of teachers (Table 7), the optimal combination is a class that consists of students of younger and older students (I–III and II–IV), while fewer teachers consider that it is better to combine students of similar ages (I–II; III–IV).

Table 7. Teachers' opinions of the optimal combination of ages in combined classes

<b>In your opinion, which combination is optimal?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Closer ages (I-II, II-III, III-IV)	10	21.74
Greater differences in ages (I-III, II-IV)	36	78.26
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

### 7) *Optimal number of students in a combined class*

The opinions of teachers on the optimal number of students in a combined class differ significantly (Table 8). Most teachers (43.48%) think that this number should be 15 students; some believe that it should not exceed 10 (28.26%), and the same percentage believe that the optimal number is 20 students.

Table 8. Teachers' opinions on the optimal number of students in combined classes

<b>How many students should a combined class have to provide the best teaching performance?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Up to 10	13	28.26
Up to 15	20	43.48
Up to 20	13	28.26
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

### 8) *Quality of knowledge of students in combined classes*

Most teachers believe that students in combined classes acquire the same quality and quantum of knowledge as students in traditional classes (Table 9).

Table 9. Teachers' opinion on the quality of students' knowledge in combined classes

<b>In your opinion, is the knowledge acquired by students in combined classes better than that acquired by students in traditional classes?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	43	93.49
No	0	0
They are the same	3	6.51
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

9) *Personal characteristics developed by students educated in combined classes*

Teachers were asked to list the students' personal characteristics, as offered in the questionnaire, which are most developed in combined classes (Table 10). All three offered answers were given practically the same significance by the teachers who participated in the survey.

Table 10. Characteristics developed by students educated in combined classes

<b>Which of the following personal characteristics of students are most developed through education in a combined class?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Students' autonomy in learning	18	39.14
Development of cooperation between students	14	30.43
The spirit of mutual help	14	30.43
<b>TOTAL</b>	46	100

10) *Difficulties in working with combined classes*

Teachers who have worked in combined classes consider that the most important problems they have encountered are:

- Organisation of work;
- Length of time needed to prepare for a class with different age groups;
- Overload of both teachers and students with educational content;
- Difficulties in assessing students' knowledge;
- Low level of preparation of future teachers for working with combined classes during their professional education.

11) *Teachers' attitudes towards working with combined classes*

Almost 80% of teachers, regardless of their previous experience, expressed willingness to work in combined classes (Table 11).

Table 11. Teachers' attitudes towards working with combined classes

<b>Would you like to work with a combined class?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	70	79.54
No	18	20.46
<b>TOTAL</b>	88	100



## Conclusion

The institutional education of teachers has not provided sufficient preparation for work in combined classes, which normally affects their performance in such classes. This conclusion is contrary to the stated research hypothesis No. 1.

Most teachers (52.17%) who took part in this survey had some experience in working with combined classes, which confirms stated working hypothesis No.2. Their experience is not very significant, since most of them have worked with combined classes not longer than two years. The most frequent combination of ages was two-age groups, which does not accord with hypothesis No. 3.

Most teachers prefer working with more widely differing age groups (grades I–III and II–IV), which is contrary to hypothesis No. 4, and they find the optimal number of students in such a class to be 15, which confirms hypothesis No. 5.

Teachers believe that students in combined classes achieve the same or an even greater quality and quantum of knowledge compared to students in traditional classes. In the teachers' opinion, studying in combined classes develops autonomy in learning, but also promotes a sense of community among students. Students care for and help each other more.

A significant amount of work, demands on energy, difficult working conditions, lack of adequate preparation, and difficulties in assessing students' knowledge are some of the most commonly stated problems that teachers encounter while working in a combined class. Regardless of all these problems, the great majority of teachers (79.54%) are willing to engage in such a process.

These findings confirm the main research hypothesis that Serbian teachers have a positive attitude towards working in combined classes.

Our results also indicate that teachers should be additionally prepared to successfully fulfil their educational tasks in combined classes,

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## STAVOVI UČITELJA PRIMARNOG OBRAZOVANJA O RADU U KOMBINIRANIM ODJELJENJIMA

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**Sažetak** – U obrazovnom sustavu Srbije kombinirana odjeljenja imaju bitnu ulogu, pogotovo u primanom obrazovanju. Kako bi ispunili obrazovne zadatke u kombiniranim odjeljenjima učitelji moraju posjedovati primjereno znanje, ali i vještine, kreativnost i visok stupanj motiviranosti. Cilj istraživanja bio je analizirati stavove učitelja u Srbiji o radu u kombiniranim odjeljenjima. Primijenjene su deskriptivne i statističke metode, dok su podaci prikupljeni terenskim istraživanjem, akcijskim istraživanjem i kombiniranim tehnikama. U istraživanju su sudjelovali učitelji iz Vojvodine. Prema definiranim zadacima dizajniran je i primjenjen upitnik za učitelje. Rezultati pokazuju visok stupanj motiviranosti učitelja za rad u kombiniranim odjeljenjima, ali i nizak stupanj primjerene pripreme. Profesionalna obuka trebala bi se poboljšati kako bi učiteljima omogućila uspješno ostvarivanje obrazovnih potreba.

**Ključne riječi:** kombinirana odjeljenja, učitelji, istraživanje

