

# THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF CLASS TEACHERS SEEN THROUGH THE REFORMS IN PRIMARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents an analysis of the contemporary educational and professional identity of class teachers in Macedonia that is created by the recent reforms in primary and higher education. The main thesis is that the implementation of the nine-year elementary education and the Bologna reform has a direct impact on the education of class teachers and opens more questions relating to their education, competencies and status. Attention is mainly focused on the challenges that the initial education of class teachers is facing with. Several inconsistencies and mismatches are indicated and discussed, concerning diplomas and titles that students gain by completing the appropriate faculty, status and competences of the profiles who may work as class teachers, as well as institutional and program setting of the education of class teachers in Macedonia. The paper also provides a brief comparative overview of the education of class teachers before and after the implementation of the Bologna system of work, regarding the duration of the studies, the study program and the organization and realization of the teaching process at different faculties that prepare future class teachers.

**Keywords:** *Class teachers, Teacher education, Educational reform, Elementary education, Higher education.*

## **Introduction**

Teacher education in Macedonia during its almost seven-decade long tradition underwent significant changes. Starting from 1944/45, when an institutional system of training teachers for primary schools was established, the process of teachers' education has upwards trend of, in the first place, quantitative development, which is indicated by the length of the training process as well as by the educational level on which it is realized. This developmental process is especially evident with the teachers who work with students in the lower grades in primary schools, usually deemed *class teachers*. That way, from the first high-school educational institutions – the teachers' schools, which produce teachers in a four years' period, in the early 1960s a shift was made to two-year Higher Pedagogical Schools, later renamed Pedagogical Academies, which train teachers at college level. Then, by the transformation of Pedagogical Academies into Pedagogical Faculties, the training of class teachers rises to university level, whereby the length of the training was equaled to that of the teachers in the higher grades in primary schools (subject teachers) and in high schools<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the development of the educational system for teachers in Macedonia can be found in Камберски, 2000; and Кантарчиев, 2002.

The latest changes in the education of class teachers in the Republic of Macedonia make a shift from quantitative, external features of the development, to qualitative parameters: raising the quality of education and achieving its compatibility with the European standards. In the realization of these goals, the key are two system reforms that took place almost simultaneously: the implementation of Bologna reform in higher education and the introduction of nine years' primary education.

Bologna system of work introduced three cycles of studies and brought many changes in the organization, length and terminology of the studies: the "old" undergraduate studies were replaced with *first cycle* of studies (Bachelor degree), the two-year post-graduate studies gave place to the new one-year studies of *second cycle* (Master degree), and instead of mentored individual work on doctoral dissertation, three-year studies of *third cycle* were introduced (Doctor degree). Taking into account that by the foundation of the pedagogical faculties in 1995 the education of class teachers became integral part of the higher education in the country, these changes became obligatory also for the faculties that prepare them, where each of them created a system of curriculum and organizational solutions that reflect the own understanding of the European educational reforms.

Beside Bologna reform, which is a global European endeavour supposed to enable international transparency and academic and professional acknowledgement of teachers' qualifications (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009), education of class teachers in Macedonia is subject to another, "internal", national reform, implemented immediately after the reform in higher education: extension of primary education length from eight to nine years (Стојановски & Чешларов, 2007). This reform led to decreasing the lower limit of compulsory schooling by inclusion of the last preschool year into the primary education. At the same time, this reform brought a new organizational setting of the primary education, as well as changes regarding the teaching staff who conduct the educational process.

Both reforms got legal framework by passing new laws for primary and secondary education, enacted the same year (Закон за високото образование, 2008; Закон за основното образование, 2008). The laws led to significant changes not only in the organization and realization of the both sub-systems, but also in the educational and professional status of the class teachers, those who, in fact, are a link between the two systems since they are a product of one of them and a main actor in the other. However, the implementation of the new legal regulations in the practice reveals identification of many imprecisions and discrepancies regarding diplomas and titles acquired by finishing the studies in the first cycle, the existing terminology in respect to the newly created situation which is a result of the implemented reforms, as well as the defining the profiles' status and their competences. In the following text we shall discuss some of these issues and dilemmas.

### **Reform challenges in the initial education of class teachers**

In the Republic of Macedonia there are five higher education institutions, which are integral part of four state universities, that prepare class teachers: the Pedagogical Faculties in Skopje and Bitola, the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Štip, the Faculties of Philosophy in Skopje and Tetovo. They all provide studies in the first and second cycle, some in the third too, with the first cycle giving the necessary qualifications for work

with students from first to fifth grade in the nine-year primary education. However, there are significant differences between these faculties regarding the organizational scheme, the programme offer and the profiles of the qualified personnel they produce.

Bologna reform and the recommendations of the European institutions for training teachers at higher education level (European Commission, 2005; Council of the European Union, 2007, C300/8), in Macedonia didn't bring any novelty in the education of class teachers, but instead they only confirmed the already established practice which since 1995 existed as a uniform model of four-year faculty education. However, it has to be mentioned that the legal regulations before the reforms in the higher and primary education allowed employment also of teachers with lower educational level, i.e. college education<sup>2</sup>

The new law for primary education prescribed as obligatory a faculty diploma for all the teachers working with students in the first five grades in primary schools (Закон за основното образование, 2008). However, taking into account that Bologna system allows flexibility regarding the organizational models of studying (4+1 or 3+2), also the faculties that prepare class teachers chose one of the two models that lead to different number of credits (240 or 180) for different profiles. According to the Law for Primary Education, in the Republic of Macedonia there are three profiles who are allowed to work with students from first to fifth grade: *class teacher*, *pedagogue* and *preschool teacher*, the last being allowed to work only with first-graders. The current situation in the initial education of class teachers in Macedonia is presented in the table given below.

**Table 1.** First cycle of studies for class teachers

Faculty	ECTS	Study duration	Diploma	Competent to work with
Pedagogical Faculty "St. Clement of Ohrid" UKIM-Skopje	240	4	Graduated professor of class teaching Graduated professor of preschool education	Grade 1-5 Grade 1
Pedagogical Faculty UKLO-Bitola	240	4	Teacher for class teaching Graduated preschool teacher	Grade 1-5 Grade 1

<sup>2</sup> In the period from 1995 to 2004, in then eight-year primary schools, as class teachers were allowed to work two profiles with completed 4-year university education: *teachers*, trained in the three pedagogical faculties in the country, and *pedagogues*, trained in the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. In the next three school years (2004/05–2006/07) a preparational year in the primary schools was introduced, where as teachers were allowed to work pedagogues, but also preschool teachers with two-year college education. With the goal of overcoming the differences in the initial preparation of the teachers working with children at the age of 6, preschool teachers were obliged by the law to acquire teacher's diploma (Закон за изменување и дополнување на Законот за основно образование, 2004). In 2007, by the integration of the preparational year into the 9-year primary education, faculty diploma became obligatory qualification for all the profiles working with first-grade students.

Faculty of educational sciences, UGD-Štip	240	4	Graduated professor of class teaching	Grade 1-5
	240 (180)	4 (3)	Graduated preschool teacher of preschool children	Grade 1
Institute of Pedagogy Faculty of Philosophy UKIM-Skopje	240	4	Graduated pedagogue	Grade 1-5
Institute of Pedagogy Faculty of Philosophy State University-Tetovo	240	4	Graduated professor of class teaching	Grade 1-5
			Graduated professor of preschool education	Grade 1
			Graduated pedagogue	Grade 1-5

The comparative analysis of the current situation in the five teachers' faculties enables identification of certain conditions that give rise to some issues and dilemmas which deserve broader elaboration.

### Diplomas and titles: terminological mishmash

Evident are various titles the students acquire after graduating from different faculties, which, in fact, have qualified them for the same job: teacher of first to fifth grade students (or first graders only) in primary schools. Namely, in their diplomas it can be stated either: *graduated professor of class teaching*, *teacher for class teaching*, *graduated pedagogue*, *graduated professor of preschool education*, or *graduated preschool teacher*. This situation is a result of inherited conditions that reflect the particular institution's tradition and the course of development in the process of training teaching staff in the country, but, at the same time, also of the changes made in the latest reforms in the primary and higher education. Together they create a complex and, sometimes, confused reality that is hard to be translated in European equivalents.

In the legal regulations the term *teacher of class teaching* is used, but in university diplomas this title can be found either in modified form, as *teacher for class teaching*, either as *professor of class teaching*. Both terms are successors of the term *učitelj*, the first and for a very long period of time the only name for the professional working in primary schools in Macedonia with children at the age from 7 to 10 years. This term was included in the name of the first secondary schools for educating teaching staff

– the *teachers' schools (učiteljski skoli)* founded right after the liberation of Macedonia in 1944/1945; this was the main profile produced by the two-year Pedagogical Colleges and Pedagogical Academies which both replaced the teachers' schools, and in such form the term was kept for a period of time also by the four-year Pedagogical Faculties, until 2008; moreover, the name of one higher education institution for teachers also included the term *učitelj* (till 2001 the Pedagogical Faculty in Bitola bore the name Faculty for teachers and preschool teachers (Fakultet za učitelji i vospitivači)). Starting from the late 1990s this term ceased to be used in the official documents and was being replaced by the unified term *teacher (nastavnik)* for all the ranks of education. Gradually, the use of this term spread also in the spoken communication between the

students and their teacher, so the traditional address to the teacher was replaced with *teacher*, too. However, the term *učitelj* can still be found in some textbooks for the lower grades in primary schools.

On the other hand, the diploma of *professor of class teaching/professor of preschool education*, more recently introduced by the Faculty of Pedagogy in Skopje and, following its example, the Faculty of Philosophy in Tetovo, probably is a reflection of the same idea, but in a much more accentuated way, which also led to substitution of the term *učitelj* with the term *teacher (nastavnik)*: elimination of the traditionally different status of the teachers who work with children of different age, which was expressed with different names: *preschool teacher (vospitivač)* in preschool institutions, *učitelj* in the lower grades in primary schools, *teacher* in the higher grades in primary schools, and *professor* in secondary schools. Though it is more than necessary to stress their equal importance, even the priority of the teacher who works with younger children compared to the other teachers, nevertheless, the use of the term *professor of class teaching*, and especially *professor of preschool education* does not achieve that goal since it is an artificial creation which does not correspond either to our educational tradition and practice, either to the modern European experiences and practices.

The variety is especially wide in the titles of the professionals who work with first-grade students, since the already mentioned variants in the name of class teachers are complemented by *pedagogue* and, with the introduction of nine-year primary schools, *professor of preschool education* and *graduated preschool teacher*, all of them in the legal provisions denoted as *teacher for preschool education* (Закон за основното образование, 2008, art. 42/2). Preschool teachers, teachers and professors are, in fact, same profiles, with same qualifications, but with different denominations. These circumstances clearly indicate the lack of harmonization between teachers' faculties, as well as between teachers' education and the legal framework it is based on.

On the other hand, the question arises about the suitability of the current terminology to the newly created circumstances that are a result of the reforms conducted. For example, the term *class teacher* is a legacy from the former concept of eight-year primary school which in organizational respect was divided in two cycles: class teaching (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade) and subject teaching (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade). However, this denomination does not correspond to the current organizational structure of the reformed primary education. In fact, the nine-year primary school is organized in three educational periods (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade, 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade), and none of them can completely be equalized to the class teaching, though in the study programmes of some faculties it is stated that class teachers have the competences for work in the first two cycles (Студиска програма за наставник за одделенска настава I и II циклус, Педагошки факултет-Битола). Actually, old terms are retained for situations that don't correspond to them. Therefore, it is of exceptional importance terminological distinctions and clarifications to be made, the initial education of the teachers to be adjusted to the new concept of primary schools, and the diplomas the graduates get from teachers' faculties to be harmonized.

### **Status and competences of the profiles: inconclusiveness and overlap**

The new concept of nine-year primary education, among else, led to redistribution of the teaching personnel: the preschool teachers from preschool institutions were

allowed to work with first-grade students, and class teachers “got” younger children from first grade. These changes gave rise to many questions and dilemmas regarding their status and competences as well as the quality of the work they do:

- The affiliation of preschool teachers is not specified, for they "sit on two chairs", being differently paid, with different status and in the jurisdiction of different ministries (the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science), which way the preschool and the school teachers' communities remain separate entities. By tradition, preschool institutions in Macedonia are in the competence of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, since initially their function was perceived as taking care of little children. But, with regard to the educational character of the work preschool institutions and the preschool teachers perform nowadays, it is necessary all the institutions and experts' profiles performing educational activities to be integrated in a single educational system;
- Given the fact that preschool teachers are allowed to work only with first-graders, every school year they welcome another generation of six years old children. As a result, providing equal schooling conditions was called into question, since those children who work with the same teacher in a period of five years are, of course, in advantage compared to those who must change their teacher after finishing first grade. Taking into account the developmental characteristics and the needs of the first-grade students, it is of great importance to reconsider the role of preschool teachers in the primary schools and their initial education, and to provide equal treatment of the children in the lower grades in primary schools;
- Until 2007, different faculties were training class teachers who would work with children at the age from 7 to 10 years, while the children of preschool age, i.e. up to 6 years old, were in the competences of the preschool teachers. With the introduction of nine-year primary education, class teachers "encroached" the domain of preschool teachers' work. However, with the exception of their initial concern about not having the appropriate qualifications for work with younger children and the individual initiatives for taking additional exams for securing wider qualifications, class teachers were unconditionally allowed to work with first-graders. The legislator took no steps concerning this issue, nor the teachers' faculties made significant changes in the studies and subject programmes: the going-to-school age was simply moved by one year earlier.

### **Institutional setting: surplus of profiles**

For such a small country as the Republic of Macedonia is, there is a large educational offer of various accredited programmes for training future class teachers. The five teachers' faculties produce different profiles which reflect the specifics of their own educational traditions.

The two pedagogical faculties in Skopje and Bitola, as well as the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Štip (recently this one too renamed as Pedagogical Faculty) share a common history: all the three are successors of the two-year pedagogical



academies which trained both class and subject teachers, which is a reflection of the strives for providing uniform education for all the profiles of teachers carrying out the curriculums in the eight-year primary schools, as well as for raising the educational level of the then teachers, from high-school to university level. In 1982 they retained only the education of class teachers and preschool teachers, and, more that one decade later, this has been transferred to their successors – the pedagogical faculties. In fact, pedagogical faculties have two basic characteristics which mark their institutional development: extension of the length of the educational process for class teachers and preschool teachers, and retaining the practical orientation of the studies.

Unlike them, the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, since its foundation in the People's Republic of Macedonia in 1946, has been providing 4-year university education for a wider profile – pedagogue, which may work both as a class teacher and as a preschool teacher. Therefrom, in comparison to pedagogical faculties, the Institute of Pedagogy has mainly academic character and focuses on both teaching and scientific research work, which is testified by the early organization of post-graduate and doctoral studies.

The youngest university-level educational institution for training teachers, the Faculty of Philosophy in Tetovo, produces all the three profiles by offering three different study programmes: class teaching, preschool education and professional pedagogy. The same integral approach was followed by the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Štip which, beside the programmes for class teaching and preschool education, in the school year 2012/2013 introduced a new study programme in pedagogy.

Taking into account that Macedonia is a small educational area with a significant number of unemployed class teachers for what reason a continuous reduction of the number of new students is done at all the five faculties, the simultaneous existence of different profiles and, especially, their further multiplication, as well as the incompatibility of the current faculty curriculums, point out the need of revision of the institutional and programme settings of class teachers' education and of defining their competences.

### **Education of class teachers before and after Bologna reform**

If a comparison is done of the initial education of class teachers before and after Bologna reform, it becomes evident that with the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System no significant changes were made regarding the length and organization of the studies: the most faculties retained the existing four-year studies which were simply transformed into 240 ECTS. The only exception was the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Štip which up to the school year 2011/2012 was offering three-year studies (180 ECTS) for preschool education. The law allowed employment of preschool teachers with different length of studies (240 or 180 ECTS), thus creating unfair competition between teachers' faculties, and sometimes, unequal chances for employment of graduated students. Probably just because of these faults, the Faculty of Educational Sciences abandoned the three-year model and brought back the education of preschool teachers to the pre-Bologna four-year length.

Much bigger changes were made in the study programmes of the teachers' faculties, being revised several times in the last ten years as a result of the current changes in the legal framework and, consequently, of the demands of the university

managements. Such frequent changes in the programmes<sup>3</sup> led to organizational problems in the realization of the teaching process that is carried out following several study programmes simultaneously: same subjects with different status (compulsory/ optional) and different fund of lessons, different groups of students (from various institutes/departments and/or faculties) studying the same subject. The revision of study programmes raises other issues as well, which are of exceptional importance for providing quality initial education of class teachers:

- The traditional disciplinary approach in the studies was replaced by modular. This means that the many-semester subjects were converted into one-semester courses, which way the very comprehensive educational material was reduced to a limited number of lessons the knowledge of whose is usually checked using tests. The students learn only to be able to pass the tests or the exams; their interest for more information, individual research, critical and autonomous thinking, are very rare phenomenons. Especially when choosing the optional subjects, the students go on the information they get from the previous generations on the volume of the material and the ease for passing the exam;
- The majority of the students learn from textbooks, manuals and materials provided to them by the respective teachers in charge of the subject in question<sup>4</sup>. In the recent years there is a significant increase in the number of issued publications by the teaching personnel from teachers' faculties, but, in this case the quantity does not necessarily mean quality, since the publications don't always meet the standards for quality textbooks or manuals;
- The European Credit Transfer System is implemented mainly as a mechanical approach for converting the fund of lessons for particular school subjects into credits, not as a comprehensive estimate of the students' workload.

The implementation of the most recently revised curriculums of the faculties that produce class teachers began in the past school year, and they are mainly related to the legally prescribed proportion between the compulsory subjects, the optional subjects from the faculty's list and the optional subjects from the university's list (Закон за изменување и дополнување на Законот за високото образование, 2011, art. 8), as well as to the organization and implementation of the compulsory teaching practice for the students in all the school years. Though the initial experiences give rise to some dilemmas, in example – about the feasibility of the concept of optional subjects, having in mind the significantly increased number of optional subjects offered to the students from various programmes, the different foreknowledge of the students in particular

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<sup>3</sup> The Institute of Pedagogy has revised its study programme three times since the introduction of the Bologna system of work at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje in the school year 2004/05. The most recent changes were made and implemented in the work with the students enrolled in the academic year 2013/14.

<sup>4</sup> One recent research of the opinions and the attitudes of 240 students from the faculties that train class teachers in Macedonia, on the organization of the educational process, showed that the majority of the students learn from manuals or textbooks written by the professor in charge of the respective subject. The percentage of those who use books written by other authors is very small, especially regarding literature in foreign languages (Miovska-Spaseva, S., Bočvarova, J., 2011, p. 14–15).



subjects, as well as the large number of students with whom the teachers work, it is anyway too early to answer the question whether and how the latest changes in the legal framework and, on these bases, the changed curriculums, are going to enable realization of the desired goals and improvement of the quality in class teachers' education.

### **Conclusion**

The latest reforms in the primary and higher education in the Republic of Macedonia have the goal of improving the quality of the education and to enable the educational system to draw near to European standards. However, they led to the creation of a more complex situation regarding the professional identity of class teachers. This is perceived in the already mentioned and in other open issues which point out the disharmony between the legal framework, the higher education institutions producing teaching personnel and the educational practice. Therefore, it is necessary an internal harmonization of the profiles to be done based on a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the current state of affairs, as well as on in-depth research of reform trends and their implications in other countries in the region and wider. Every structural change in the educational system ought to involve integral and systematic approach, for by harmonization and coordination of the interventions in various segments it is possible to avoid hasty, partial and inefficient changes leading to discrepancy between the educational policy and the educational practice. Only on this basis, then, the so much desired compatibility and comparability in international context can be achieved.

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