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STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT INTEGRATION OF STUDY COURSES

Abstract: Searching for the possibilities of improving the quality of university education, we noticed that the programs (syllabuses) of study courses contain common and mutually related elements or parts of content which can be successfully integrated. By integrating the content of study courses, university education becomes innovative, modernized and creates a space where the teachers can express their creativity and professional competences. The aim of this research was to determine the opinions of students (N=116) of III and IV year of undergraduate studies at the department *Preschool teacher* regarding the possibilities of improvement of the quality of university education through the integration of study courses. By analyzing those opinions, we tried to determine the impact of integrative university education on quality, application of knowledge, motivation and self-confidence of students. The research was conducted by applying the descriptive method and surveying procedure. Research results confirm that the opinions of students, when it comes to the impact of integrative education on the understanding of the material, the quality of acquired knowledge and success in exams, their commitment and motivation for studying, self-confidence and preparedness for working with children, are positive.

Keywords: university education, integrative approach, opinions, students.

INTRODUCTION

On the road to improving university education, the quality and innovations of the education process at all levels should be high, and the basic assumptions for securing the quality of the process and outcome of university education are engagement of students in the education process, mutual project activities with teachers, their readiness for learning and taking initiative, quality of their knowledge and possibility of acquiring new, applicable knowledge. The analysis of recent research (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson & Coulson, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Margerum-Leys & Marx, 2002) about education of teachers for application of modern teaching technology shows numerous examples of educational programs, training and additional education of teachers, the integral part of which

are, with the exception of implementation of the educational technology, the ways that boost integration (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000; Fulton, Glenn, Valdez & Blomeyer, 2002; Fulton, Glenn & Valdez, 2003).

The fact that our country joined and entered the European educational space determines the strategic approaches of development of higher education the primary goal of which is to improve the quality of teaching, i.e. to enable the students to “obtain functional knowledge (applicable in practice), develop key competencies and thus secure their place at the labor market with their personal qualities and professional competencies” (Kopas-Vukašinić, Golubović-Ilić, Cekić-Jovanović, 2017: 161). In that context, the *quality of teacher's work* is considered as the key factor of the quality of education, conditioned by their permanent professional training, development and widening the professional competencies in accordance with the dynamic changes, needs and requirements of modern society (*Strategy of development of education in Serbia until 2020*, 2012). The university teacher is expected to create conditions and organize the lectures in such a way so that the students can express their creative potentials, to enable them for critical thinking and understanding the problem, for application of acquired knowledge and their transfer in different life and professional situations by applying different innovative models (Kopas–Vukašinić, 2017). One of the ways to modernize and innovate the university education is the integration of study courses.

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

Integrative education is an “innovative model where there are no strict boundaries between study courses” (Stanković, Golubović-Ilić, 2018: 304), and its impact on the interest of students is far greater if the integration is established among study courses where such a connection is not expected and usual. An integrative approach to education “insists on exiting the *course frameworks*, where contents with slight mutual connection used to be placed” (Jovanović, 2016), and it favors the teaching of interdisciplinary phenomena and topics, cross-cultural and interrelated course fields. Integrative education is directed at “co-organization and co-responsibility, and then, gradually, towards self-organization and self-responsibility” (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2007), thus contributing to the students' independence and development of their professional competencies. One of the important characteristics of modern university education is that *student is in the center of education*, i.e. *student-centered learning* (Liarakou & Flogaitis, 2007; Tsurusaki & Anderson, 2010; Condeand Sanchez, 2010). In literature about higher education (hereinafter HE), two notions are “mostly used in triple meaning: (a) new approach to the culture of HE based on the constructivist theory of learning; b) interactive methods of educational work which promote active

participation of students; (c) involvement of students in designing the curriculum and its evaluation” (Geven & Attard, 2012, according to Bodroški-Spariosu, 2015: 413).

As for university classes, it is common that teachers hold the lectures individually, while cooperation of teachers in the realization of certain parts of study programs are rare. Teachers work alone, they are isolated from each other, they do not have the opportunity to observe the work of their colleagues, the effects and the impacts of their work on the quality of students' knowledge. In a situation like this, what may happen is that the teacher, in accordance with their aspirations, interests, and extensive knowledge of certain parts of the matter, devotes more attention to an area for which they are “specialized” or more interested, and not to the contents that are more important and necessary for the students. That is why it is important to provide that, in one or several classes, the students listen to several teachers with different teaching and professional competencies, viewpoints and manners of engagement of students. During the integration of study courses, teachers share responsibilities, cooperate, work together on planning and preparing the lectures, resources and evaluation of students (Đukić and Španović, 2006), thus making the evaluation of students more objective.

INTEGRATIVE TEACHING – ”FOR” AND ”AGAINST”

In professional and scientific texts, integrative teaching can be treated as a synonym or term of similar meaning with the following terms: cooperative teaching, partner-teaching, co-teaching, and team teaching (Stepić, 2016). Integrative teaching resembles the most to the *team teaching* where teachers jointly plan, carry out and evaluate the lectures intended for a group of students (Lloyd Trump according to Đorđević, 1997).

Integrative university teaching is characterized by direct work of usually two teachers who discuss with students about the following: 1) contents from different fields (in our case Methodology of Physical Education – MFE and Methodology of Introduction to the Environment – MIE); 2) specific topics (MFE - *Prevention and correction of flat feet*, MIE – *Materials and their characteristics*) from different angles, perspectives, from different levels and aspects of expertise. In one piece of research (Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek), students' opinions show that integrative learning contributes to the active participation in lectures, mobilizes the existing knowledge and experiences, reflexive discussion, self-evaluation, anticipation and working on the personal concept of learning” (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2007:159). In Serbian educational system Integrative teaching is rarely and occasionally applied (usually in pre-school institutions and primary schools),

while course teaching, high school teaching and university teaching are mostly closed to these.

Conditions for successful application of integrative teaching in higher education are that the teachers are first and foremost familiar with its theoretical bases, to be creative, have adequate skills and desire for innovative lectures, the awareness that in this way, they can improve their individual teaching competences (Vasilijević & Laketa, 2013), improve the curriculum, study programs and increase the intensity and quality of teaching activities, which will, most certainly, reflect on the achievement of students, quality of their work and their success in exams (Đukić and Španović, 2008). Integration of study programs requires the gathering of teachers from several different professions regarding the development of common and interdisciplinary topics, the emergence of common work roles and the routine of classical realization of teaching and motivates them to work together with other members of the staff (Boreham, 2002). Not all the teachers can adjust to such a method of work, because every change or novelty in any field of human labor in most cases faces resistance. Integration of study programs includes the need to invest additional time in terms of planning and reorganization of work, change of schedule of classes, procurement of the necessary equipment and materials for work, etc. (Buckley, 2000).

By applying the integrative approach to the university education, students of pedagogical faculties have double benefits (Murawskog & Swanson 2001). Primarily, their knowledge is of better quality and lasts longer, and, at the same time, they are enabled to use the integration of educational content in working with children in pre-school institutions. Lectures based on the integration of study programs can be very stimulating and encouraging for students, and the interrelated contents contribute that the knowledge adopted by the integrative approach be comprehensive, applicable in practice and long lasting (Stanković and Golubović-Ilić, 2018) Besause of those reasons it is desirable that the students attend such classes during their studies (Stanković and Golubović-Ilić, 2018) and also to have practical experience with that way of work. With the intention to check whether students recognize the integration of study courses as a new possibility for improvement of the quality of university education, we conducted a survey of 116 students who actively participated in the application of integrative teaching in the study courses Methodology of Physical Education and Methodology of Introduction to the Environment. These are the students of III and IV year of undergraduate studies at the department *Teacher in pre-school institutions* of the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac, Jagodina.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We set the quality of university education as the subject of research by applying integrative approach. The aim of the research was to determine the opinions of students regarding the impact of integrative approach on the quality of university education. The quality of university education was viewed from the aspect of impact of integrative teaching on: 1) understanding of the matter, quality of acquired knowledge of students and their success in exams; 2) motivation for studying and 3) self-confidence and practical preparedness (application of knowledge) for performance of the vocation of preschool teacher. The following research tasks have been set based on these objectives:

1. To determine whether students notice the positive impact of the application of integrative teaching on their understanding of the matter, quality of their knowledge (whereby we think not only of the knowledge from study courses which the current researchers had integrated before the research, but also on the quality of knowledge in general) and success in exams;
2. To examine the opinions of students regarding the impact of the application of integrative teaching on the approach of the university education on their *dedication and motivation on studying*;
3. To examine whether the students consider that their *self-confidence and practical preparedness* for working with children in preschool institutions is the consequence of the application of integrative teaching at the faculty.

In this research the current researchers used the descriptive method and surveying technique. In February 2018, students of the Faculty of Education at the University of Kragujevac, Jagodina (N = 116) completed a questionnaire which was created for the purposes of this research (five-fold scale of Likert's type of views consisting of 10 claims).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the process of increasing the quality and outcome of education is "to increase the efficiency of use of all resources of education" (*Strategy of development of education in Serbia until 2020*, 2012: 7). By examining the opinions of students – future teachers about the effects of integration of study courses, the current researchers tried to determine the impact of such a manner of work on the improvement of the quality of university education.

The first research task was supposed to determine whether students notice positive impact of the application of integrative teaching on the understanding of the matter, quality of their knowledge and success in exams. During the course of theoretical studies, students of the III year of studies have been familiarized with the conceptual definition, the essence and importance of integrative teaching, and manner and possibilities of its application, while students of IV year also took active participation, i.e. attended the classes which were simultaneously held by two teachers from the mentioned study courses. Students' opinions were examined in relation to three claims: 1) Application of integrative teaching contributes to better success of students in exams; 2) Integrative teaching has a negative impact on understanding of the matter and 3) Knowledge of students, from study courses the content of which is integrated and has more quality in comparison to the knowledge of study courses the content of which is acquired in isolation from other courses (control claim). Descriptive indicators point to the fact that the majority of students surveyed, 76 of them (65.5%), in relation to the claim 1) say *I agree* and 36 of them (31%) *agree completely*. They believe that the application of integrative teaching has a positive impact on their success in exams, while only 4 students (3.4%) have a negative opinion. The calculated value of the median (as average measure, since the data come from the ordinal scale), which in this case amounts to 2.00 confirms these results, as well as the fact that more than half of the students involved in the research have a positive attitude about the stated claim.

When it comes to the second claim (which the current researchers purposefully formulated contrary to the presupposed opinions of students), the descriptive indicators were the following: 52 (44.8%) of the students *disagree completely* with this claim, 60 of them (51.7%) *disagree* with the claim, thus enabling the current researchers to check, on one hand, whether the students filled in the questionnaire automatically and without thinking, and on the other hand, whether the majority of the surveyed students believes that the application of integrative teaching has a negative impact on their understanding of the matter.

Table 1. Distribution of students' opinions about the first three claims

No.	Claim	I agree completely	I agree	I don't know	I disagree	I disagree completely
1.	Application of integrative teaching contributes to the better success of students in exams	36 (31%)	76 (65.5%)	0	4 (3.5%)	0
2.	Integrative teaching has a negative impact on the understanding of the matter	0	4 (3.5%)	0	60 (51.7%)	52 (44.8%)

3.	Knowledge of students, from study courses the content of which is integrated, has more quality in comparison to the knowledge of study courses the content of which is acquired in isolation from other courses	84 (72.4%)	20 (17.2%)	12 (10.3%)	0	0
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Only four students had a positive opinion regarding this claim. The value of the median in this case was 2.00.

Opinions of students about the third claim are also positive for more than half of the respondents. The results show that 84 (72.4%) students *agree completely*, 20 (17.2%) *agree*, 12 students or 10.3% of respondents opted for the answer *I don't know*, and there were no negative opinions. The mean value (median 2.00) is an indicator that the attitude of the majority of students regarding the mentioned claim is positive. Research conducted by Murawski & Swanson (2001) also shows that integrative teaching provides multi-level instructions to the respondents and that students have positive opinions about this issue. According to students' opinions, combining the matter in integrative teaching enables the application of multi-functional material and one way of a partnership between teachers and students, and thus contributes to the more quality knowledge of students from study courses the content of which was integrated (Feiman & Nemser, 2001).

Based on the presented results (Table 1), the current researchers state that the students notice the positive impact of the application of integrative teaching on their understanding of the matter, quality of their knowledge and success in exams.

This distribution of opinions is similar to results of previous research (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2007; Spraker, according to Đukić and Španović, 2008), because students, regardless of the year of studies, agree that integrative teaching contributes to their success and better results in exams, and that the grading methods are more objective when several teachers grade each student from their aspect (Đukić and Španović, 2006; Boreham, 2002). Considering that 96% of them have a negative attitude towards the claim that *integrative teaching has a negative impact on the understanding of the matter*, it is clear that the students are aware of and notice the benefits of observation, connection and processing of the same contents (parts of different study programs) from different levels and aspects of professionalism of teachers who teach those courses. A greater number (10.3%) of neutral attitudes (*I do not know*) when it comes to the quality of knowledge acquired through integrative teaching in relation to the teaching where the contents of study courses are acquired in isolation from other courses, is supposedly made

by the students of the III years of studies who didn't have any practical experience when it comes to integrative teaching until the beginning of the research, which is somewhat understandable, justified and expected.

The second research task was supposed to examine the opinions of students about the impact of implementation of integrative teaching on their *dedication and motivation for studying*, which was done by the claims: 1) Practical examples of integration of content of two or more study courses and analyses/realizations of directed activities of implementation of such a method of work motivate me additionally; 2) I expect that university teachers will engage me and motivate me more in practice by using the integrative approach and 3) It would be good to have more classes held simultaneously by two or more teachers at the faculty, because those classes are more interesting and encourage me to participate more. Students of the III year of studies only analyzed such examples in the scope of theoretical lessons before the research was conducted, whereas students of the IV year had active participation in integrative teaching (realization) of the contents of MFE and MIE. Research results show that 84 students (72.4%) *agree completely*, while 24 (20.7%) *agrees* with the first statement. About 93% of respondents (median value 2.00) have a positive opinion regarding the statement that practical examples of integration of contents of two or more study courses and analyses/realization of directed activities motivate them additionally. Eight students (6.9%) had a neutral opinion (*I don't know*), and there were no negative opinions.

As for the second statement "I expect that university teachers will engage me and motivate me more in practice by using the integrative approach" descriptive indicators point to the fact that 64 students (55.2%) *completely agree*, 48 (41.4%) students *agree*, and four students (3.4%) *disagree*. The current researchers assume that the negative opinions were expressed by the students who did not attend the classes regularly, they were fine with being passive and did not have any additional engagements during the academic year other than preparing and taking the exams. Median value (1.00) points to the fact that the attitude of more than 75% of respondents is positive.

Distribution of opinions about the third statement partially differs from the opinions about the two previous statements. Namely, 36 (31%) students *agree completely*, 64 (55.2%) *agree*, and 8 (6.9%) students have neutral (*I don't know*) or negative attitude (*I disagree*) respectively. The value of the median was 1.00 – more than 75% of students have a positive opinion.

When the current researchers analyze the opinions of students (Table 2) with regard to the statements concerning the second research task, the conclusion is reached that a certain number of students notices the positive impact of integrative university teaching on their dedication and motivation for studying, but that there also are students who do not have positive opinions about it.

Table 2. Distribution of opinions of students about statements 4, 5 and 6

No.	Statement	I agree completely	I agree	I don't know	I disagree	I disagree completely
4.	Practical examples of integration of content of two or more study programs and analyses/realizations of directed activities motivate me additionally by applying such method of work.	84 (72.4%)	24 (20.7%)	8 (6.9%)	0	0
5.	I expect that university teachers will engage me and motivate me more in practice by using the integrative approach	64 (55.2%)	48 (41.4%)	0	4 (3.4%)	0
6.	It would be good to have more classes held simultaneously by two or more teachers at the faculty, because those classes are more interesting and encourage me to participate more.	36 (31%)	64 (55.2%)	8 (6.9%)	8 (6.9%)	0

Considering that the characteristic of integrative teaching is that education is student-centered (Liarakou & Flogaitis, 2007; Tsurusaki & Anderson, 2010), that integrative methods of work promote the active participation of students (Geven & Attard, 2012, according to Bodroški-Spariosu, 2015), opinions of the majority of students are positive. We assume that negative and neutral opinions were expressed by the students who, on the one hand, don't want and don't like to be active in classes and students who do not have the knowledge and practical experience about integrative university teaching.

The third research task was to examine whether students consider that their *practical preparedness* for working with children in pre-school institutions to be a consequence of the implementation of integrative teaching. Students' opinions were examined in relation to four statements: 1) University education with practical and evident examples of integrative approach prepares students better for future work with children in pre-school institutions; 2) it is not necessary that integrative approach be used in university education so that I can use that method of

work in my work; 3) I know what integrative approach in working with children of pre-school age includes and 4) I am familiar with the ways in which I can apply the integrative approach in my work.

Distribution of opinions of students about the first statement which refers to the third task was the following: *I completely agree* 84 (72.4%) students, *I agree* 20 (17.2%), and 12 students (10.3%) said that they *didn't know*. The median value was 1.00 – more than 75% of students have a positive attitude about the fact that university education with practical and more obvious examples provides better and more preparedness for future work with children in preschool institutions.

The second statement of the third research task was formulated in a negative context with the intention to determine the opinions of students about their practical readiness for implementation of the integrative approach in future work. Here the results were the most diverse in comparison to all previous statements: 12 (10.3%) students *agree completely*, 24 students (20.7%) *agree* with the statement, and eight students (6.9%) have neutral attitude (*I don't know*), 48 students (41.4%) *disagree* with the mentioned statement, and 24 (20.7%) *disagree completely*. We assume that mostly students of the III year of studies had positive opinions about the statement *It is not necessary that the integrative approach be used in university education so that I can use that method of work in my work*, because based on the theoretical lessons, the implementation of integrative approach seems easy and simple. Students at the IV study year believe that such a method of work is necessary in university education. Of course, the assumption and causes of the students' considerable self-confidence when it comes to the practical application and their ability to apply the integrative approach should be examined and checked in some future research. The median value of 4.00 indicates that more than half of the students have a negative attitude towards this statement. They believe that it is necessary that the integrative approach be present in university education so that they could use such method of work in their work.

The third statement - "I know what integrative approach in working with children of pre-school age includes" was intended to examine the opinions of students about their knowledge of the essence of the integrative approach in working with children. The majority of students (76 or 65.5%) *agree* with the mentioned statement, 28 students (24.1%) *agree completely*, 12 students (10.3%) had neutral stance (*I don't know*) and there were no negative opinions. An indicator that the opinion of the majority of students is positive is a median value (2.00).

The last, fourth statement - "I am familiar with the ways in which I can use the integrative approach in my work", determine the opinions of students about their (self-evaluation) practical preparedness for implementation of the mentioned approach.

Table 3. Distribution of opinions of students about statements 8, 9 and 10

No.	Statement	I agree completely	I agree	I don't know	I disagree	I disagree completely
7.	University education with practical and evident examples of the integrative approach prepares students better for their future work with children in preschool institutions	84 (72.4%)	20 (17.2%)	12 (10.3%)	0	0
8.	It is not necessary that the integrative approach be present in university education so that I can use such method of work in my work.	12 (10.3%)	24 (20.7%)	8 (6.9%)	48 (41.4%)	24 (20.7%)
9.	I know what integrative approach in working with children of pre-school age includes	28 (24.1%)	76 (65.5%)	12 (10.3%)	0	0
10.	I am familiar with the ways in which I can use the integrative approach in my work	8 (6.9%)	80 (69%)	24 (20.7%)	4 (3.4%)	0

Descriptive indicators indicate that 80 (69%) students *agree* with the statement, 24 (20.7%) students had a neutral attitude (*I don't know*), eight students (6.9%) *agree completely*, while four (3.4%) students *disagree* with the above statement. As with the previous statement, the median value (2.00) shows that the attitude of most students is positive. Students' opinions about the statements related to the third research task (Table 3) point to the fact that they consider their *practical ability* to work with children in preschool institutions partly as a consequence of the application of integrative teaching.

This group of results is also in line with previous research and indicators that by applying an integrative approach, students become technically more skilled, organized, more creative, more responsible and independent for future work (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2007; Conde and Sanchez, 2010). The causes and reasons for a different distribution of students opinions about the last 4 statements (Table 3) could be the subject of some future research, but the fact is that the teacher is responsible for developing key competencies of students, acquiring functional knowledge and transferring them in different life and professional situations (Kopas-Vukašinović, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Lectures, teaching and evaluation in modern university education should be adjusted and directed at students. Instead of being passive listeners of study programs, students should become active parties in the teaching process, creators of their own development, with basic skills and abilities to learn independently and adapt to changing circumstances (Kwok, 2015). The efforts and aspirations of university teachers should be focused on the classes where students would have an initiative, be thoughtfully engaged, active in solving creative tasks and motivated (Stanković, Golubović-Ilić, 2018). University teachers are facing a serious, complex task and a professional challenge to enable their students to quickly learn, react, and adapt to different life and professional situations, make decisions, and think critically. Twenty-first century teachers, including university teachers, are expected to be using different innovative models in teaching, which will create conditions in which a student will demonstrate his creative potential, develop responsibility, flexibility and critical evaluation of others' and personal achievements.

The results of the research show that students consider that implementation of integrative university teaching contributes to their success and better results in exams, a better understanding of the content of study courses that are integrated and the quality of the acquired knowledge; they are aware of and perceive the advantages of linking and processing the same content (parts of different study programs) from different levels and aspects, due to their more intense engagement, dedication and greater motivation; most of them believe that the integration of study programs also influences their practical ability to perform future vocation and develop professional competencies. Based on this, the current researchers confirmed that the integration of study programs is significant and necessary for the improvement of university education and that students have positive attitudes about integrated teaching. In this context, and with the aim of improving education at universities, all teachers, step by step, should enrich, change and transform their professional practice through integrative teaching.

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