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САДРЖАЈ | CONTENTS

ПЛЕНАРНА САОПШТЕЊА | PLENARY LECTURES

Aleksandar S. Tadić

IS IT WORTH FIGHTING FOR “EDUCATION IN THE
CLASSIC SENSE“? 21

I

ВАСПИТНО-ОБРАЗОВНЕ ДИЛЕМЕ У ПРОЦЕСУ НАСТАВЕ И УЧЕЊА
EDUCATIONAL DILEMMAS IN THE TEACHING
AND LEARNING PROCESS

Katarina B. Putica

FOUR-TIER TESTS AS A MEANS FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF
CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHEMISTRY CONTENT 37

Вера Ж. Радовић, Теодора А. Тодовић

МОРАЛНЕ ВРЕДНОСТИ У ПРОГРАМИМА НАСТАВЕ ОД ПРВОГ
ДО ЧЕТВРТОГ РАЗРЕДА ОСНОВНЕ ШКОЛЕ 50

Марија П. Којовић Трапарић, Сања Р. Благоданић

ЗНАЊА И ЗАБЛУДЕ УЧЕНИКА ЧЕТВРТОГ РАЗРЕДА О ПЛУТАЊУ И
ТОЊЕЊУ ТЕЛА И НАЧИНИ ЊИХОВОГ ПРЕВАЗИЛАЖЕЊА 65

II

НОВЕ ПРОГРАМСКЕ КОНЦЕПЦИЈЕ У ОБРАЗОВАЊУ
NEW PROGRAMME CONCEPTS IN EDUCATION

Драгана Б. Вукићевић, Наташа Б. Станковић Шошо

ИНТЕРМЕДИЈАЛНОСТ У НАСТАВИ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ 83

Јелена Љ. Вујић, Мирјана М. Даничић

СТРАНИ ЈЕЗИЦИ У ПРИМЕНИ – НОВИ ХОРИЗОНТИ
У ВИСОКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ 94

ПЛЕНАРНА САОПШТЕЊА

PLENARY LECTURES

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IS IT WORTH FIGHTING FOR “EDUCATION IN THE CLASSIC SENSE“?²

Abstract: In modern market societies, in a rapidly changing world, it is unquestionable and natural to determine the goals and priorities of the education system and policies through the concepts of competence, skills, qualifications, and in line with market needs, employability and technological development trends. The marginalization of traditional pedagogical terminology (education in the classic sense and teaching) is so noticeable that its use today is considered either strange or as a provocation. The topic of the scientific conference New Horizons of Education offers an opportunity to reconsider how we understand education today, whether it has an authentic value or whether we assess its value through social and individual benefits. Such provocation is supported by the analysis of the priorities and measures within education policies which (instead of following the pedagogical principles of education) are rather based on the economic principles and clichés of the New Management, i.e. on the glorification of practical skills, productivity, flexibility and mobility. Such policies result in developing procedures for standardization, learning, testing and competition (instead of strengthening emancipatory practices aimed at achieving autonomy, authenticity and maturity of persons supposed to make an active contribution to both the economic development and the democratization of society and humanization of relations in society). The concluding considerations affirm pedagogical optimism, as a personal belief without which it is impossible to succeed in the struggle for the neglected pedagogical principles and goals of education.

Key words: *pedagogy, education, pedagogical principles, educational policies, pedagogical optimism.*

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The theme of the scientific gathering *New Horizons of Education*, held in Belgrade (Serbia), is officially titled in the Serbian language as: *Novi horizonti vaspitanja i obrazovanja*. For this paper, written in English, it is important to bear in mind that the English word “Education” is sometimes translated into Serbian as “vaspitanje” (meaning “education in the classic sense”), and most commonly as “obrazovanje” (meaning “intellectual education”). They are the two basic pedagogical concepts, mainly defined following the pedagogical literature in the Russian language (“*воспитание*” / “*образование*”) and in the German language (“*Erziehung*” / “*Bildung*”).

There is a high level of consensus regarding the definition, distinction and use of the concepts of “vaspitanje” and “obrazovanje” in the pedagogical literature in the Serbian language. Regarding the goals, “vaspitanje” refers to the ancient, or, from the contemporary perspective, the *humanistic*, ideal of harmonious growth and development of all human potentials. All-encompassing development in the past used to be defined in the moral, aesthetic and physical spheres. The Industrial Revolution brought about changes in production processes and mass institutionalization of care for young people’s upbringing. Thus commenced the era with a focus on “obrazovanje”. The goals that were now given priority pertained to the sphere of the cognitive development of a personality, those related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the development of cognitive capacities and enabling one for work. “Obrazovanje” refers to “how much one knows and can do, what their general culture is like and what kind of an expert they are” (Kocić, 2004: 24-25). “Vaspitanje” is a broader concept which, apart from the abovesaid, encompasses answers to the questions such as: what kind of a person one is, what their personality is like, and what human characteristics they have developed.

When used in pedagogy, the noun phrase “vaspitanje i obrazovanje” (as in our conference theme in the Serbian language) or the adjectival compound “vaspitanje-obrazovni” indicates the tradition of the humanistic conceptualization of the school system which relies on the concepts of *humanity, the man’s calling, the overall development of a human being, fundamental general education* and the like (Cvejić i Krstić, 2020). Further in the text, we will be using the English word “education” starting from this tradition and the wider scope of the term, which is also referred to in reference literature as “education in the classic sense”.³ The goals of the “educational” process, whether they are being written about, systematically arranged or practically applied, cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of knowledge and qualifications. They should not be narrowed down to the training in practical skills usable mostly in the procedures of candidates’ selection for higher levels of education and gaining the desirable socio-economic status in the

3 The terms often used in modern Anglosaxon literature are “moral education” or “character education”.

labour market. Such processes must also include a distinct emancipatory component and be directed towards a harmonious development of the personality and a level of maturity characterized by critical self-reflection.

The use of the term “education“ in the stated meaning is quite common in pedagogical scientific community. However, the very pedagogical perspective is less and less visible due to its long-term marginalization and removal from focus within current educational policies and financially supported research and professional projects. The use of the mentioned phrases “vaspitanje i obrazovanje“ and “education in the classic sense“ might thus seem unusual and anachronistic today. It might also be understood as defying *the spirit of the times*. The opportunity to discuss this topic at an important scientific gathering in today’s world might also be regarded as a provocation. That is how I understood it. When I refer to it as a provocation, I have in mind the meaning given to it by two authors. One of them is Konrad Paul Liessmann, now retired Austrian philosopher, who taught the Methods of teaching philosophy and ethics at the University of Vienna until recently, and whose book *Theory of Non-Education – Misconceptions of the Knowledge Society*⁴ (2009) drew a lot of attention in Europe. Liessmann is also the author of the book *Education as a Provocation* (Germ. Bildung als Provokation, 2017). The other important author who wrote about the affirmation of pedagogical perspective as a provocation is Philippe Meirieu, professor of pedagogy at the University of Lyon, whose thesis about the calculated naivety, as a provocation on which pedagogical optimism is based, I will be using in my concluding remarks.

Of course, in order to see farther away while speaking about horizons, it is necessary to “climb on the back of previous generations“. In this paper I would like to express special gratitude to prof. Nikola Potkonjak (1924-2021), professor of pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade. Although it is customary to refer to the dilemma announced in the paper title in the final part of the text, I will be suggestive. To resolve the dilemma about the struggle for the neglected general principles of the education system in Serbia I will refer to the texts in which professor Potkonjak wrote about students’ autonomy as the basic pedagogical goal. In these texts he stressed his hope that in the 21st century we would manage to have the school tailored to the child and the world tailored to man (Potkonjak, 1996; 2003; 2020).

In his last published book (2020) professor Potkonjak addresses again the basic pedagogical dilemmas: what is education and what are the goals of education? He recognized a serious challenge for pedagogues for the 21st century, to convincingly demonstrate that a person as a unique personality must become the center of everything we do, and thus also the “subject of the entire education and pedagogy” (Potkonjak, 2020: 65). In the analysis of the instrumentalization

4 Original title: *Theorie der Unbildung – Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* (2006)

of education by economic and political interests, he started from pointing out the tendency towards setting the goals of education today as “the development of human resources” and “the development of human capital”, justified as a condition for the future development of the country, its competition with other countries, and competitiveness on the world labour market. He presented a critical position regarding the vision of the world in which the labour market has become the justification for and measure of values and material profitability of systemic decisions in the education sector. “For them, there is no ‘spirituality of man’, there is no ‘society of values’, ‘morality’, there is no man as the bearer of those values!” (Potkonjak, 2020: 170-171).

Biljana Bodroški Spariosu, professor of pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade, wrote about the effects of the pressure of the politically promoted neoliberal agenda on pedagogy. Under such pressure, “pedagogy has not only reconceptualized education as learning or accumulation of human capital, but has got into the position where all its constituent elements are threatened: the autonomous subject of study, methodological pluralism and the original pedagogical terminology” (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022: 20). The subordination of educational policies to particular economic interests has led to the suppression of the pedagogical perspective and terminology in systemic and research projects focused on the already known learning outcomes, the development of reading, scientific or mathematical literacy, the formation of human capital, investing in early development, etc.

Regarding the dilemma of *whether it is worth fighting*, I would first refer to a part of the literary description of Yanis Varoufakis, who writes about different types of values and describes goods as life values and prices as market values of commodities (Varoufakis, 2015). If we understand education as a public good and a value in itself, the answer arises that it is worth fighting for, but also that it is the duty of all educators. On the other hand, if we reconcile with *the spirit of the times* and accept that we see education as a resource, an investment, a commodity that is brought to the market, then the resolution of the dilemma will depend on a personal assessment of the price to be paid or the profitability of the work invested.

“Goods” themselves are valuable for us, they have an authentic value, they make us feel good. When goods are offered for sale, and this becomes their purpose, they become commodities. This way they get their price which reflects their market value. Varoufakis points to the frequent tendency of modern societies to measure all values as market values. “There is a tendency to consider everything that has no price, everything that cannot be sold for a profit as worthless. And vice versa” (Varoufakis, 2015: 27).

International organizations (World Bank, UNICEF, European Commission, OECD...) have been acting as promoters of the global neoliberal political agenda for decades. They influence reforms of educational systems around the

world, using opportunities to finance projects that achieve certain political and economic goals, such as economic growth. Starting from the economic logic, the investment of material resources in activities that influence the targeted achievements and competencies of children is seen as an entrepreneurial investment in the so-called human capital that will bring them better positions and opportunities for success during life, such as the desired workplace, high incomes and social prestige (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022).

In educational systems around the world, the results of various international and national tests are used, but there are significant differences in relation to whether such indicators are used to support students and improve curricula, or whether the selection/qualification function is recognized as the basic one. The understandable pressure experienced in such circumstances by both teachers and students is related to their perceptions of the important and unimportant subjects, and meaningful and meaningless activities, with the main criterion being one's contribution to the preparation for the test (Tadić, 2019). Thus the focus in schooling is being directed to what is measured by tests. And what is not checked is: how much the way of learning has made the students more independent, more responsible, more creative, how empathetic and solidary they are, whether they have a critical attitude towards what is served to them as knowledge, towards decisions that significantly affect their life in school and society, whether they know how to talk to others, how to assertively express their views, how tolerant they are of different opinions and disagreements, whether they appreciate the personality and needs of others, whether they are activated by awareness of the public good... When these indicators of education are not tested and scored, a message is being sent that education in the classic sense has no instrumental, market value in the world we live in – that it is worthless.

As a science that has chosen education as its mission, and is based on the principles of humanity, emancipation and democracy, pedagogy is being suppressed from educational policies in the global world, whose characteristics are precisely articulated by professor Ljiljana Levkov of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade: “reality show as a state of affairs, propaganda as a state of mind, anesthesia as a state of being, consumption as a way of life, etc., etc.” (Merije, 2016: 7, preface to the Serbian edition). In such a world, the marginalization of traditional science that studies the processes of upbringing, education and teaching takes place in parallel with the production of new scientific fields (early development, lifelong learning, parenting, educational management, etc.) as a consequence of the economization of education in the sector of educational policies (Bodroški-Spariosu, 2022).

Experts from such fields are the bearers of reform processes in educational systems around the world. In projects financed by important international organizations, in legislation, programme documents, national and comparative reports and analyses, new terminology is also being promoted and normalized

(learning, competences, literacy, human capital, investment in development, ...). It is one of the steps towards presenting neoliberal principles as *normal* and self-evident, which is how a neoliberal ideological discourse is formed in educational systems, which should legitimize reform measures as natural and unquestionable (Harvi, 2012).

In many countries in transition “the negation of Marxism determined a sudden transition to the opposite pole of the political spectrum and the adoption of neoliberalism as an official doctrine” (Birzea, 1995: 19). In the 1990s, the neoliberal agenda became the inspiration for educational reforms in many Central European countries, especially in the countries in transition. When we talk about the situation in the Republic of Serbia, one should have in mind that it is a state positioned at the periphery of the world capitalist system with a more pronounced instrumentalization of the education system by dominant political and economic interests (Tadić, 2019). It is not unusual for economists to view education as a profitable investment or for the economic policy to count on contributions from education. “But when these aspects of the economics of education become the key agenda of the entire educational policy and the entire educational system, then, from a pedagogical point of view, we can join the critics who warn of the dangers of the so-called economic imperialism” (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022: 22-23).

In the following part of my paper, I will open another topic, important for many pedagogues who see authentic value in education. Centuries ago, this point of view linked the subject of pedagogy research to different ways of the research. Methodological pluralism in social sciences is viewed today with nostalgia by many researchers faced with the dominance of empirical research. We are forced to write according to a formatted model, precisely established within a framework of positivist methodology. There is an increasingly present demand to step out of such patterns and re-appreciate the standpoint that *education is the bearer of values*. “The pedagogical study of education has never been a value-neutral story about what is happening here and now, independent of the relationship to the past and the future” (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022: 21). Philippe Meirieu is one of the significant contemporary pedagogues who affirm the *traditional* pedagogical standpoint that in pedagogy, although we should think as consistently as possible, we are not at all in the field of positivistically understood science. That is, that in pedagogy “we cannot avoid considering values” (Merije, 2016: 30). Questioning the goals of education, questioning the ways and conditions of their achievement, obliges us, as Meirieu writes, to declare what kind of school and what kind of world we stand for.

The inevitable contradictions that accompany the intertwined interests of society (reproduction of stable social relations) and individuals (harmonious development of an autonomous and authentic individual) are the basic theme of pedagogical classics. In times when societies tied the influence on the development of individuals to strong coercion, placing individuals in *the state of systematic*

subjugation, pedagogues emphasized the necessity of the emancipatory function of education (Merije, 2016: 17). Today still, to defy or resist the domination of the instrumentalization of education according to economic principles and criteria, pedagogues work actively on strengthening the pedagogical function of schools. Philippe Meirieu writes that school and teaching practice are obliged to enable children to acquire different kinds of knowledge, but above all to “help them grow up and become autonomous individuals and free people” (Merije, 2014: 9).

With this categorization, Meirieu acknowledges the adaptation of individuals to the given environment as a legitimate goal of education, in order for them to prepare for the performance of social roles, and for the acquisition of professional qualifications needed in the labour market. However, he particularly emphasizes the need to maintain continuity with the pedagogical tradition of resistance to the narrowing of institutional pedagogical action to the acquisition of knowledge, while highlighting the need to strengthen the emancipatory component of education. In the pedagogical sense, systematic education and integration into the social environment include the liberation of the student.

Professor Nikola Potkonjak (Potkonjak, 1996) shared the same opinion, writing about contemporary pedagogy as a synthesis of pedagogy of preparation for life (oriented towards social existence) and pedagogy of personality formation (oriented towards human essence). Between these two poles, pedagogy should position itself first of all as *critical awareness and conscience of the existing educational practice*, as a science that always acts on behalf of the neglected, insufficiently acknowledged pole. Considering that the pendulum has moved too far away from the human essence and humanistic values in modern market-based societies, it is clear that pedagogy must put in its essence “a clear projection of man – a being, an individual, as an autonomous human personality” (Potkonjak, 1996: 237).

In order for a teaching activity to be considered as pedagogical, it has to include the above-mentioned emancipatory component (with the focus of teaching on the content being learned, the questions of how and why that content is learned become important). What is being sought is the transformation of the teaching process instrumentalized by economic interests (productivity, competitiveness, mobility,...), curbing the dictate of efficiency, rethinking the adopted practices of national and international testing as key evaluative mechanisms and abandoning the concept of teaching as imparting knowledge and preparing for tests (Tadić, 2019). On the other hand, what is expected is redirection towards *the human dimension*, towards helping individuals to express and realize their potential.

Modern pedagogues who consider the autonomy of the individual as the goal of education, link such determination to the general process of democratization. Strengthening the pedagogical role of the school (as well as education and emancipation) through enabling and supporting the development of autonomy

implies building a system of education based on general principles defined as humanistic, emancipatory and democratic. Such principles were incorporated decades ago into the basis of the education system in the Republic of Serbia through the introductory article of The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (2003, 2009, 2017). In the last basic law from 2017, out of 10 principles of education, most fall into the mentioned category. They determined that the education system must provide:

- equality and accessibility of the right to education;
- focus of education on the student and their needs;
- education in a democratically organized institution;
- dedication to basic moral values, justice, truth, solidarity, freedom;
- application of achievements of scientific disciplines important for the process of education;
- democracy through the involvement of all participants in the system of education in the creation and implementation of educational policies...;
- autonomy of the institution through the planning and implementation of appropriate activities, programmes and projects aimed at improving the quality of education.

On the other hand, what is happening in the institutions that create and implement educational policies and in the institutions of the educational system in the Republic of Serbia indicates that the aforementioned principles are not taken as the basis for the development of the educational system, but are rather, I would say, of decorative character. In the book I published in 2019 under the title *At a Distance from Manipulation*, I presented arguments for which I labelled the current situation in the education system, after the adoption of several laws in 2017 and 2018, as systemic undermining and marginalization of the pedagogical component in education. In short: “Management of the education system according to the models taken over from profit-oriented business organizations (managerialization) led to the centralization of educational administration, rationalization of the number of pedagogues and other professional associates in schools, the orientation of teaching work to students’ achievement in tests and to the decrease of internal motivation of educational workers for pedagogical work” (Tadić, 2019: 67).

Today, educational policies are based on managerial principles of *system efficiency*, *financial savings* and *productivity*. I will emphasize several topics worth thinking about related to that. In the Republic of Serbia 350 primary schools have been closed in the last two decades, mostly in rural areas. From 2001 to 2014, 159 schools were closed. The imperatives of efficiency and financial savings have been connected with the intensification of these decisions in recent years, so from 2014 to 2020, 191 more schools were closed (Tadić, 2021). I believe that such decisions were largely made inevitable by the reduction of public investment in education. In the last four years, the share of total public expenditure on education has been only 3.2% of GDP (Tadić, 2021).

In this period, in most European countries, where the percentage of GDP per capita is higher than in Serbia, the share of public investment in education has been between 4 and 5%, while in the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway and Finland) it was between 7% and 8% of GDP (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). *Savings measures* in the public sector (such as the ban on employment) and the percentage reduction of public investment in education in the previous period can be connected with the reduced number of employed teachers and professional associates in schools, with the employment of tens of thousands of teachers on a temporary basis, with the work of a large number of teachers in more than one school in order for them to meet the norm of tuition hours.

Another significant topic is the politicization of the selection of responsible individuals, the non-inclusion of external professional associates from relevant national institutions and associations in the field of education, which synergistically hinders the realization of projected goals in the education system. Deviation from today's obvious dominance of political and market criteria in the field of education is a prerequisite for strengthening the pedagogical function of schools. It would also be an indicator of the efforts to place the neglected pedagogical principles in our educational system on stable foundations, on which a better school and teaching will be built and a better world will be mentioned. The key dilemma is whether we put the educational system in the function of the market and its interests, while minimizing costs, or we create through its development conditions for the humanization of individuals who will be able, through intellectual and moral independence, to make an active contribution to economic development, democratization of society and humanization of relations in society.

Instead of a conclusion, at the end of the paper, I will return to the unavoidable dilemmas for anyone who questions their personal relationship towards the fact that we work in a world where organizational models of pedagogical work, success criteria and educational policy priorities are determined by the logic of profit. Is it worth fighting for? Are we fighting already lost battles? Are we working against ourselves by doing so? With that in mind, I will refer to the authors and theses I wrote about earlier. In the monograph on strengthening the emancipatory component of the pedagogical work of teachers in market societies, I devoted one chapter to pedagogical optimism (Tadić, 2019).

In more difficult circumstances than the ones we are witnessing today, 250 years ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau fought to shape the Enlightenment vision of egalitarianism, civil liberties and solidarity. In his magnificent pedagogical work, *Émile, ou de l'Éducation*⁵ (1762), he writes about *the education of a free man* as the basic educational goal (Rousseau, 1950). In the following quote, I see Rousseau's answer to the aforementioned dilemma regarding the horizons towards which

5 *Émile: or on Education*

we are heading: “But did I tell you that an education according to nature would be an easy task? [...] I admit that I am aware of these difficulties; perhaps they are insuperable; [...] I am showing what we should try to attain, I do not say we can attain it, but I do say that whoever comes nearest to it is nearest to success” (Ruso, 1950: 93–94).⁶

With this belief, Rousseau refers to Fénelon’s words from the treatise *On the Education of Girls*. The intention to lay the foundations of a better education requires writing about perfect rules. Although in practice not everyone will be able to do what we imagine and write down, it is useful for everyone to meet perfection, to try to reach it, which is “the best way to get closer to it” (according to: Ruso, 1950: 94).

The contemporary French pedagogue Philippe Meirieu defined the basic pedagogical principles emphasizing that they should be understood as absolute requirements. This is also how the following principle should be understood: “Everyone can learn and no one can decide that learning is not possible for any individual”. If we who educate doubt the possibility of the fulfilment of this pedagogical principle, if we doubt our own capacity to teach everyone, or the ability of every being to do what we teach, then the pedagogical principle itself “falls to pieces” (Merije, 2014: 24). Like Rousseau, who is very aware of the arguments due to which the advocacy of the mentioned pedagogical principle could be considered strange in today’s world, he sees the optimistic attitude of the pedagogue as a necessity. He formulates such an attitude as *calculated naivety*.

The pedagogue perseveres in his conviction calculatedly. Insisting on the claim about the possibility of education for all people, and the conviction of success, is a provocation to think, to imagine, to act, to reach one’s freedom. Such a pedagogical principle is not a true thesis, it is not a description of the existing situation, but rather a thesis to be checked and “a horizon towards which one should look” (Merije, 2014: 27). Only under such circumstances do pedagogical principles direct our actions in everyday pedagogical activities. “One should, in fact, strive to achieve what seems at the same time very necessary and certainly unattainable /.../, one should prove that the deed is possible even when the result is impossible. /.../ Calculation, therefore, means persistently working as if things were potential historical and long-term achievements, while in fact one knows that they are only exceptional and short-term possibilities /.../, which is enough to justify persistence and everyday inventiveness” (Merije, 2014: 29–30).

It is in the aforementioned that I have found my answer to the dilemma from the title of the paper. Both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Philippe Meirieu take *the power of optimism* as a basic thesis for reconsideration, convinced that it gives a special meaning to our existence and daily pedagogical activities, regardless of the end result.

6 Translated by Barbara Foxley. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5427/5427-h/5427-h.htm#link2H_4_0003

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ВРЕДИ ЛИ БОРИТИ СЕ ЗА ВАСПИТАЊЕ?

Апстракт

У савременим тржишним друштвима, у свету који се убрзано мења, неупитним и природним се сматра одређивање циљева и приоритета просветног система и просветних политика употребом појмова компетенције, вештине, квалификације, усаглашених са потребама тржишта, могућностима запошљавања и трендовима технолошког развоја. Маргинализација традиционалне педагошке терминологије (васпитање, образовање и настава) до те мере је уочљива да се њена употреба данас сматра или чудном или провокацијом. Тема научног скупа *Нови хоризонти васпитања и образовања* нуди прилику да преиспитамо како данас разумемо васпитање, да ли оно има аутентичну вредност, или њену вредност процењујемо преко друштвених и индивидуалних бенефита. Таква провокација поткрепљује се анализом приоритета и мера просветних политика утемељених на економским принципима и менаџерским флоскулама (уместо на принципима васпитања и образовања), на глорификацији практичних вештина, продуктивности, флексибилности, мобилности и с тим у складу развијаних процедура стандардизације, учења, тестирања, такмичења (уместо на намерама јачања еманципаторских пракси усмерених на достизање аутономије, аутентичности и зрелости појединаца који ће моћи да дају активан допринос како економском развоју тако и демократизацији друштва и хуманизацији односа у друштву). Закључним разматрањима афирмише се педагошки оптимизам, као лично убеђење без кога је немогућ успех у борбама за занемарене принципе и циљеве васпитања и образовања.

Кључне речи: *педагозија, васпитање, принципи васпитања и образовања, образовне политики, педагошки оптимизам.*