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THE *ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS* ELECTIVE: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE*

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ABSTRACT

The education paradigm oriented towards key competence development has shaped national curricula across the world, including Serbia. In line with this trend, the academic year of 2020/21 saw the introduction of the *Economics and Business* elective into grammar schools. Considering that every educational change requires monitoring and evaluation to provide decision-makers with information based on research data, this paper presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted as part of a larger mixed-methods evaluative research project. The study aimed to provide a deeper insight into teachers' opinions and experiences regarding certain characteristics of this elective program and its implementation in the third and fourth grades of grammar school in Serbia. It encompassed three semi-structured group interviews involving 19 teachers (55.6%) who taught this elective (six to eight respondents per group). A five-phase inductive-deductive qualitative analysis was conducted. Based on teachers' narratives, three themes were identified pertaining to experience with implementing the *Economics and Business* elective: 1) Program Content Contributes to the Youth's Quality of Life and Education; 2) Program Implementation is Dynamic, Comprehensive, and Supportive of Teacher Autonomy; 3) Challenges in Program Preparation and Implementation. Teachers recognized the contents encompassed by the *Economics and Business* elective as relevant to grammar school students' education. Inquiry- and project-based learning constituted a didactic-methodical solution that afforded teachers greater organizational freedom and autonomy while simultaneously motivating students to be more engaged in class. The observed challenges and difficulties in implementing the program were mostly organizational. The paper features recommendations for further program improvement.

Keywords:

elective program introduction, *Economics and Business*, grammar schools, monitoring and evaluation.

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■ INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, the education model oriented towards key competence development promoted in numerous international education policy documents (the UN, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the OECD) has led to changes in national curricula and affected the preparation and organization of teaching practice, teachers' implicit beliefs about how students learn, and even grading. In line with these trends, the academic year of 2018/19 saw the implementation reform changes at grammar schools in Serbia, including curriculum paradigm modifications, a new, interdisciplinary approach to teaching, and a vast selection of electives (SROVRS, 2021: 18). The introduction of electives into secondary schools constitutes a systemic attempt to overcome the lack of optional courses or extracurricular activities, support the youth's career development, satisfy their educational and developmental needs, aspirations, and interests during secondary education, and familiarize them with the economic needs of the country (OECD, 2020). Worldwide, different approaches have been applied to introducing and implementing economics content at primary and secondary education levels, as part of the integrated curriculum, individual subjects (e.g., Mathematics or Civic Education), social sciences, or independent electives (OECD, 2016), as is the case in our country.

The Context of the Introduction of the *Economics and Business* Elective Into the Grammar School Curriculum

In Serbia, the reform of the grammar school curriculum included the introduction of the principle of electivity (OECD, 2019), which refers to students' freedom to choose some of the interdisciplinary programs available in grades one through four (Rulebook on the Grammar School Curriculum, 2020). In grades three and four, there are nine elective programs¹ with two classes per week. Out of the nine available, each grammar school selects five programs and each third-grader chooses two out of five programs to attend for the following two years. The *Economics and Business* elective forms part of this program package and has been implemented since the academic year of 2020/21. The program is designed to contribute to the development of general cross-curricular competencies, such as enterprising qualities

¹ These programs include *Education for Sustainable Development*; *Art and Design*; *Applied Sciences 1* (medical sciences); *Applied Sciences 2* (technical sciences); *Introduction to Geopolitics*; *Economics and Business*; *Religions and Civilizations*; *Scientific Research Methodology*; *Modern Technologies*.

and an orientation toward entrepreneurship. Accordingly, the *Economics and Business* elective focuses on mastering the basic notions, concepts, and principles in economics, allowing students to understand the essential mechanisms of the laws of economics and the relationships between the individual, the economic system, and the state, along with their roles and their interdependence, in order to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to responsibly and successfully participate in the economy (Rulebook on the Grammar School Curriculum, 2020).

The implementation of this program is required to align with the *General Guidelines for Elective Program Implementation* and the *Guidelines for the Didactic-Methodical Implementation of the Economics and Business Program* (Rulebook on the Grammar School Curriculum, 2020). Unlike all other elective programs, this grammar school elective is taught by experts in the field of economics who have not attended pedagogical, psychological, and methodical courses during their formal education. These teachers receive support in the form of three-day systemic training². This training focuses on scrutinizing the general and didactic-methodical guidelines for elective program implementation, analyzing recommendations on the key concepts encompassed by program content, guiding inquiry- and project-based learning, as well as monitoring, evaluation, and grading practices.

The introduction and implementation of the *Economics and Business* elective requires program monitoring and evaluation to enable making systemic decisions based on research data. In Serbia, educational program monitoring and evaluation have mostly been conducted in the context of Religious Education and Civic Education (Gašić-Pavišić & Ševkušić, 2011; Gundogan et al., 2016; Džamonja-Ignjatović et al., 2009, 2019; Joksimović et al., 2003; Pavlović et al., 2020; Ševkušić & Milin, 2009). The aforementioned studies evaluated elective programs encompassed by earlier education reforms. To the best of our knowledge, there have been no evaluations of elective programs introduced within the reform of the grammar school curriculum.

² The Institute for the Improvement of Education, in cooperation with the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Economics and Business and the Institute for Educational Research, created a program of public interest – *Supporting Teachers in the Implementation of the Economics and Business Elective at Grammar Schools*.

METHOD

Qualitative evaluation studies (Wright, 2013) seek to enhance the understanding of practitioners' beliefs regarding the nature and specific characteristics of an educational program, as well as the processes and actions practitioners undertake to achieve the desired outcomes envisioned by the educational program (Patton, 2015). The methodological design of this research was exploratory. Hence, it did not focus on theory testing and improvements but on the evaluation of the relationship between the formal curriculum of the elective program and its implementation at grammar schools. More specifically, as part of a larger mixed-methods evaluative research project (Malinić et al., 2024), this qualitative study aimed to provide a more comprehensive insight into teachers' opinions and experiences regarding certain characteristics of the *Economics and Business* elective and its implementation in the third and fourth grades of grammar school in Serbia. The results of this study should allow decision-makers to map the directions of changes with the aim of overcoming the challenges teachers face during the preparation and implementation of this elective.

Participants. A typical case sampling strategy was applied in accordance with Patton's (2015) framework. The study was conducted at 16 out of a total of 31 grammar schools and vocational schools with general education programs at which the *Economics and Business* elective was implemented during the academic year of 2022/2023³. More precisely, the focus groups included 19 out of 34 teachers who taught this elective during the aforementioned academic year. Hence, the study encompassed 55.6% of the population of *Economics and Business* teachers. The study was conducted during May 2023.

Data Gathering Techniques. The group interview technique was employed to determine how the formally defined elective (the theory prescribed by the program) was implemented in the teaching practice by the actors (theory in action during program realization) (Patton, 2015). The group discussions allowed teachers to elaborate on their thoughts, emotions, and experiences regarding the elective.

A semi-structured group interview was conducted, with predefined topics, open-ended questions, and a flexible interview process. The following four topics from the Guide were discussed during the interview: 1) Program Implementation Training; 2) Program Content and Aims; 3) Characteristics of Learning Activities

³ According to the available data of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the database of the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Belgrade for the academic year of 2022/23.

during Program Implementation; and 4) Student Characteristics and Behavior during Program Implementation.

Data Gathering Organization. Three group interviews (six to eight participants per group) were conducted with teachers who taught the *Economics and Business* elective at grammar schools. The group interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 120 minutes. The moderators were two out of three authors of this paper. Online conversations were recorded using Zoom platform tools and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis. A qualitative secondary data analysis was conducted. The inductive-deductive analytical process comprised five phases (Bingham, 2023). To develop the organizational coding scheme, the first phase involved organizing data according to specific criteria: the type of technique used (e.g., group interview), data source (e.g., teachers), the time when the research was conducted (e.g., May 2023), and the location (e.g., the online environment in which the interview was conducted). In the second phase of deductive coding, the data were sorted and labeled using descriptive codes wide in scope, in accordance with the aim, research questions, and topics from the Group Interview Guide. Data not relevant to the research questions were excluded from further analysis. The third phase involved the application of inductive open coding for the purpose of identifying new concepts within the wider descriptive codes developed in previous phases. The data from the transcripts were read and analyzed to determine whether they could be described by the existing codes or whether it was necessary to create new codes. Along with constant code comparisons, modifications were made to the previously defined codes. The fourth, interpretive phase focused on reviewing coded data from the previous phase and identifying patterns within and among the data to develop and isolate themes. Saldaña (2013) noted that codes, categories, and themes created during all the aforementioned phases can be revised or eliminated. The fifth phase encompassed devising a scientific explanation with the application of deductive and inductive analytical practices. During this phase, research findings were interpreted in accordance with the theoretical framework, concepts from education policy documents, and the results of other relevant studies. An example illustrating the data coding process is shown in Table 1.

At the end of the coding process, the original data and the category list were forwarded to an independent evaluator to assess intersubjective agreement (kappa values were calculated for all categories). Evaluators achieved a high level of

intersubjective agreement (Fleiss et al., 2003), considering that the *kappa* values for the obtained categories ranged from 0.80 to 0.93.

TABLE 1. Illustration of the Coding Process – Example

Transcript Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Analytical Codes	Categories	Theme
“ ...This beautifully shows the essence of it all, that they research and discover on their own, while we simply help them learn what is crucial...”	Elective Program Implementation Training	They Research and Discover Independently A Teacher who Facilitates	Reflecting on Elective Program Implementation Training	Program Implementation is Dynamic, Comprehensive, and Supportive of Teacher Autonomy
“Finally, it is never monotonous for us. It is always different, always new, always diverse, which enriches our professional experience. Because we can never foresee what the class will look like, which is great news for me.”	Characteristics of Learning Activities During Elective Program Implementation	Inquiry- and Project-Based Learning is a Godsend Teachers’ Motivation is High	Inquiry- and Project-Based Learning Is an Adequate Solution	

■ RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of transcribed conversations with teachers led to the identification of three themes: 1) Program Content Contributes to the Youth’s Quality of Life and Education; 2) Program Implementation is Dynamic, Comprehensive, and Supportive of Teacher Autonomy; 3) Challenges in Program Preparation and Implementation. Table 2 shows the three themes and nine response categories.

TABLE 2. The Coding Process: Themes and Categories

Themes	Categories
Program Content Contributes to the Youth's Quality of Life and Education	- Students' Interest in Elective Program Content - Developing Financial Literacy - Teachers' Reflexive Approach to the Elective's Content, Aims, and Outcomes
Program Implementation is Dynamic, Comprehensive, and Supportive of Teacher Autonomy	- Reflecting on Elective Program Implementation Training - Research- and Project-Based Learning is an Adequate Solution - Strategies for Motivating Students to Actively Participate in Elective Classes
Challenges in Program Preparation and Implementation	- Student Overload - Class Organization Difficulties (Mis)understanding the Concept of Program Electivity

Theme 1: Program Content Contributes to the Youth's Quality of Life and Education

The first theme pertained to the elective's contribution to the youth's quality of life and education based on students' interest in learning about economics, teachers' expectations regarding the development of students' financial literacy in modern society, as well as the purposefulness of the planned content, realistically set goals, and the desired outcomes to be achieved.

Students' Interest in Elective Program Content. Nearly all teachers emphasized the great interest of grammar school students in the content of this program (*Yes, Economics and Business is the most popular elective by far, 160 % at our school. Enough said.*). Students proved to be more interested in acquiring practical and functional knowledge, which reflects their entrepreneurial tendencies compared to more abstract content dealing with the functioning of the state from the economic perspective (e.g., state's economic role).

... for them, the most interesting topics are founding companies, making a business plan, and what impressed me in all of this is that although they do not know much about accounting or other economics subjects, they did it really well;

... as colleagues pointed out, what interests them most is entrepreneurship and students worked in groups on the task of starting a business.

...in the fourth grade, the topics are too serious... it may not even be a matter of having too much to learn, it is just that the topics are not as interesting, which reflects on their presentations and projects.

Teachers asserted that students can develop an interest in more abstract content by learning about economics topics through practical situations, problem tasks, or play (e.g., role-playing) as well as visiting relevant institutions and talking to experts in the field of economics. Likewise, creating key incentives or questions using digital tools proved effective in increasing student interest in economics.

In terms of motivation... they love it when you give them some examples and then play a movie, for instance, or bring someone from the economic sector...

Right now, we are working on developing everything from a business idea to a business plan using artificial intelligence.

Developing Financial Literacy. Teachers maintained that grammar school students need to be economically and financially literate, emphasizing the functionality of the knowledge they should acquire.

Each individual needs to be familiar with the functioning of the state or any financial institution in the country and learn how to function in society.

... my goal is to ensure that every student gains an understanding of the economic life through Economics and Business. So, to become a life economist. Let us say, naturalist. So, an economic naturalist.

They do not know how a bank loan works, why interest rates fluctuate, what banking products there are...

Teachers' Reflexive Approach to the Elective's Content, Aims, and Outcomes. Responses gathered by this category illustrate teachers' reflective thoughts about the importance of economic knowledge for the youth's life and education as well as the aims and outcomes that need to be achieved in accordance with the curriculum. Teachers found that this program's content was desirable for grammar school students since it affords them the opportunity to master basic economic concepts, acquire practical and functional knowledge, and nurture a critical attitude towards social and economic reality. Contents tailored to young people's interests have a real-life grounding and align with the trends in modern society. Topics covered in the third grade seem to be more interesting, practical, and engaging in comparison to

the complex and abstract topics covered in the fourth grade. Teachers noted that the program lacks content concerning the European Union.

Teachers agreed on the realistically set goals that need to be accomplished within the *Economics and Business* elective but differed in their evaluations of the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes. Namely, some teachers believed that the foreseen outcomes set the bar excessively high, especially in the fourth grade, and that the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes can depend on teaching methods and class characteristics. They found that the foreseen learning activities (projects, debates, or discussions) allow teachers to evaluate the quality of the knowledge acquired, encourage students to critically approach the content covered, and help students develop their communication skills and support their decisions with arguments.

So they know how to listen to others and distill the best idea based on which they will make certain decisions, because that is crucial in life, as I always tell them, the major roads in life have no signs, but vast economic knowledge can help them.

... finally, the ultimate goal of what we do is to get them to think about certain things that they would otherwise never be encouraged to think about.

Teachers further emphasized that this elective's content allows for the development of intersubject competences, which depends on the teacher's approach.

We linked Economics and Business to Serbian. We had an experimental class where they established how they should write business letters so they linked it to our subject and how they would communicate exactly when, in the fourth year, the topic was tourism.

And all of these other [competences] they can acquire through any kind of activity both in the research phase and the project phase.

Theme 2: Program Implementation is Dynamic, Comprehensive, and Supportive of Teacher Autonomy

This theme encompassed three response categories pertaining to teachers' reflections on the training for the implementation of the *Economics and Business* elective, teachers' attitudes towards the recommended didactic-methodical approach applied in the implementation of the program, and the strategies teachers use to motivate students to be more engaged in class.

Reflecting on Elective Program Implementation Training. All participants stated that they were satisfied with the quality of the training aimed at improving teachers' competences for elective program implementation. Specifically, teachers mentioned receiving clear instructions for planning and implementing inquiry- and project-based learning and getting acquainted with the teaching strategies that support students' cognitive engagement in class (e.g., they learned how to encourage students to formulate research questions).

... Everything we learned was highly pertinent and applicable. Truly amazing... from classbook entries to how to select and cover topics... the presentation and materials you gave us after training, they are like a holy book, I keep going back to them, reading, analyzing what else I should learn from them... So, this training has really helped me immensely and meant a lot to me.

... Now I no longer question how I should work on my own, ask questions, motivate them to ask questions, formulate research questions, and then choose the project to work on and so forth. It has helped me a lot and meant a lot to me.

Most teachers stated that they actively learned, practiced, and applied their knowledge during training. In other words, they could horizontally exchange knowledge, experiences, and good practice examples with colleagues from numerous schools. Teachers suggested creating an online database featuring teaching materials and good practice examples that they could exchange with their colleagues. One of the teachers even emphasized that the training encouraged her to research independently in order to increase her professional knowledge and her students' interest.

I am over the moon. It really gave me this foundation and guidelines and I worked on my own, of course, I have done some research. I have to say I have done my best to pique their interest.

Several teachers stated that they independently enriched the topics with certain concepts, critically approached social phenomena, and discussed them with students.

You also showed us that we have the freedom to pick a topic and let them share their opinions and then organize workshops. It meant a lot to me to be able to avoid mere lectures, where they are just passive listeners instead of active participants.

Inquiry- and Project-Based Learning is an Adequate Choice. Teachers deemed this didactic-methodical approach suitable. They emphasized that in the context of

this program, they were creators who freely made decisions regarding the practical organization of their work. They strove to guide and monitor students as they worked on their projects, search for incentives and additional research materials, and provide useful instructions when researching a particular topic.

I loved it because there was freedom. Students' freedom and then also my freedom at work and all that.

What I love and value most about this Economics and Business thing of ours is that we are the ones creating classes... all subjects more or less should have this same methodology. Because it is truly precious, precious. Finally, it is never monotonous for us. It is always different, always new, always diverse, which enriches our professional experience. Because we can never foresee what the class will look like, which is great news for me.

According to teachers' opinions, this didactic-methodical approach allows for the formation of cooperative learning groups that differ from usual group work. In such groups, students divide tasks and duties among themselves and they all contribute to solving the task in order to achieve the group's common goal.

In regular classes, group work means that the best students do all the work and others rely on them. That is not the case here. I have noticed that they usually divide the topic or assignment, what they need to research, do, everyone is in charge of one part and then they make sure that when they need to present their work, everyone shows up, participates... So it is not the case of one person doing all the work and others are just free riders... And they all feel like they have contributed and that they are equally important when they present their work, everyone participates in discussions and shares some opinions, so I think that is great.

Teachers found that inquiry- and project-based learning helps students develop: 1) cognitive skills (e.g., searching for relevant information, formulating arguments during discussions, evaluating facts, and comparing contradictory phenomena); 2) communication and social skills (e.g., public speaking, time management, debating, and teamwork skills); and 3) learning motivation (they compete with one another, they are more engaged, and they show greater interest in group work).

To have the freedom to have their own opinion, so they can participate in discussions without hesitation, so they can actually use their knowledge to present their thoughts. They all have their own perspectives, but above all, the knowledge they possess and their mastery of it later give them the freedom to speak publicly, as I noted before.

...So they can draw these conclusions, explain, really discuss the topics, and use this professional knowledge...

Teachers stated that they cooperated with students' parents and important actors in the local community by inviting them as guest lecturers. Likewise, they often organized activities outside school, in cooperation with relevant individuals from state institutions (e.g., the National Bank), private companies, and other schools in the country.

For two years, we have been cooperating with a secondary school of economics, it is really interesting to see how we [grammar school] and they respond to the same topics. We have compared our views and theirs. Completely different perspectives on the same topic. So that is what I found fascinating, we learn from them and they learn from us, you see. This can be achieved by cooperating with another school.

Strategies for Motivating Students to Actively Participate in Elective Classes. The content of this category illustrates the teaching strategies applied to maximize student interest and engagement in class. Based on participants' narratives, the following strategies were identified.

a) *Creating different incentives* – teachers need to find different kinds of incentives/stimulation to keep students as engaged and interested as possible (*... You need to spark children's interest that way, give them something to latch onto, and then they get to work; it is all about incentives, I just go back to incentives. I'm Ms. Incentive.*).

b) *Linking students' interests to learning topics* – teachers need to monitor, observe, and converse with students to discover their interests and link them to the lesson at hand (*I find out what it is that interests them in real life and try to adapt it... some students show resistance, 'it is of no use to me, I did not want it in the first place' ...then we try to use their everyday life interests to learn about economics*).

c) *Building a relationship with students* – teachers need to openly communicate with students, recognize their emotional needs, and exchange life experiences with them (*I first talk to my students... we always communicate openly. And when I notice some changes in a student, I talk to the homeroom teacher because family problems significantly impact student motivation and behavior.*). Likewise, teachers need to be positive authority figures whom students respect.

d) *Relying on practical, real-life examples in class* – teachers need to employ such examples to help students relate to the learning content and the key concepts

in economics. Teachers stated that they found such examples in digital and media sources, personal experience, or the experiences of other relevant individuals (*... I use short video clips, the education channel, then we used Art Lino to cover topics relating to the Market...*).

e) *Organizing additional activities at school* – teachers can organize additional activities such as competitions, clubs, or workshops that are not mandatory or commonly conducted within the elective (*I started an entrepreneurship club so I could involve students in special classes because they do not have electives; company competitions, both local and state entrepreneurship competitions, there is nothing better than that, previous generations still talk about that... because the kids who want that, who are motivated, who are willing, they find a way in the end.*).

f) *Acknowledging students' opinions* – teachers need to treat their students as mature individuals who have well-grounded opinions on different topics covered in class (*I think it is great that they can state their opinions, and I listen to them as serious interlocutors, let them say what they think about a specific issue or topic being covered.*).

g) *Introducing students to the importance of the knowledge of economics for everyday life* – teachers need to make students realize why it is crucial that they master a particular topic or concept in the field of economics and business (*In the third grade, I start telling them that economics is all around them. When they get up and need coffee, they have to get money to be able to afford that coffee; ... I covered hyperinflation with my students, we sensed this crisis, we already knew that there was going to be trouble.*).

h) *Building a positive self-image* – teachers need to verbally encourage students to work harder and better and create opportunities for students to test their competences, which can positively affect their self-image (*...when university professors are standing next to them and they speak in front of everyone... I tell them, you are not aware of how much you have outdone yourselves, see, they are listening to you and you are still in secondary school; they need to get out of the box, because most of them are in the box. Of course, they prove to be good students, excellent, but they just end up being good workers and that is that. They do not use their capacities to the fullest. So that is what I try to awaken in them and make them realize they can do more.*).

i) *Creating challenging and problem tasks* – teachers need to create tasks so that students are oriented towards finding solutions to a real problem (*...they can think*

about how they would run a company and when they encounter a problem, how they would solve it).

Theme 3: Challenges in Program Preparation and Implementation

The third theme focused on the challenges teachers faced when preparing and implementing the *Economics and Business* elective. Category contents highlight the difficulties teachers typically faced when organizing classes, along with student overload and diverse understandings of the concept of program electivity.

Class Organization Difficulties. When it comes to this elective, class organization differed across grammar schools. Some scheduled electives before the first class or after the last class (eighth and ninth classes), when students are already tired or disinterested. In other grammar schools, some or all elective classes were held online, which most teachers found unacceptable due to difficulties in grading, discussion organization, and paper presentation as well as students' insufficient engagement in the online environment. Additionally, some teachers were forced to rotate with their colleagues or organize classes on Saturdays. Furthermore, they found it difficult to establish cooperative relationships with local institutions for the purpose of student projects due to the lack of time and resources.

...It is their seventh or last class and they are often tired or have to learn for a test, so they have to prepare and they cannot always be fully focused and engaged. These are some of the flaws, but not of the program per se, more of the way it is implemented at our school and fitting it in with all the mandatory subjects we have.

It was impossible to organize all those classes online. We even had online classes on Saturdays instead of weekdays, which was really inconvenient. And then the principal made her decision and now they are part of the regular schedule but as the eighth class or the first class.

Apart from organizational difficulties, nearly all participants stated that student overload was also caused by the abstract nature, extensiveness, and complexity of the topics covered within electives in the fourth grade. Likewise, two electives in addition to numerous other school subjects were deemed excessively demanding for grammar school students.

I want to say that the workload is the issue, too many subjects and two electives, my personal opinion is that it is too much.

And then when they start learning macroeconomics... the fourth grade certainly is more problematic than the third and I agree with my colleagues.

(Mis)understanding the Concept of Program Electivity. Teachers asserted that students misunderstood the concept of electivity, which made work and communication with students more difficult. Students understood electivity as their freedom to choose whether they would attend the program or not. They expected good grades regardless of their effort and often relied on those grades to improve their GPA. In addition to calculations regarding grades, teachers noted that students sought to postpone deadlines, did not honor commitments, and skipped classes. Teachers believed that such problems could be solved by making the elective mandatory. Some of them strived to counteract students' misbehavior by respecting the school culture, consistently adhering to rules, and preserving their reputation.

Generally speaking, it is not a problem specific to Economics and Business but common to all grammar school electives, they serve to improve students' GPAs, give the highest grades, and let children relax completely. I do not know where they got this idea from and that is that.

■ DISCUSSION

In numerous European countries, secondary education focuses on developing students' competences in the domains of economics, entrepreneurship, and business as well as fostering students' initiative and readiness to take responsibility for their lives in modern society (OECD, 2019; Pilz, 2012; Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Our participants expressed similar views, highlighting the importance of the youth's financial literacy and practical and functional knowledge, in line with the results of previous studies (Amagir et al., 2018; Brancewicz et al., 2014; Compen et al., 2015). According to the latest findings, awareness of the significance of the youth's mastery of economic and financial concepts constitutes a key element of general literacy in the modern world (Fornerno & Lo Prete, 2023). Having in mind the bigger picture, teachers involved in our study believed that grammar school students should develop a critical attitude towards social reality, which is in line with our education system's aim to form the future cultural and intellectual elite as the driving factor in the country's development (Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia, 2021).

Most teachers believed in the attainability of the elective's goals as prescribed by the *Guidelines for the Didactic-Methodical Implementation of the Economics and Business Program* (Rulebook on the Grammar School Curriculum, 2020) and maintained that the planned outcomes could be achieved by applying teaching strategies oriented towards actively constructing knowledge, such as discussions, debates, and project-based learning. Furthermore, teachers listed diverse instructional strategies that increase student interest and engagement in *Economics and Business* classes (e.g., creating different incentives, linking the topics to students' interests, and introducing students to the importance of the knowledge of economics for everyday life). Likewise, using practical, real-world examples in teaching has proven effective in enhancing students' understanding of the key concepts and topics in the field of economics and business. Using everyday life examples contributes to students' perception of program relevance (OECD, 2014) and improves motivation quality and learning outcomes (Asarta et al., 2014; Sawatzki & Sullivan, 2017). Hence, the *relevance of the topic* constitutes one of the key pedagogical characteristics of educational programs in the field of economics (Amagir et al., 2018).

It is essential that the preparation of teachers of economics subjects focuses on acquiring teaching competences (Bouley et al., 2015; Canning et al., 2012; Sawatzki & Sullivan, 2017). In our study, teachers who had a degree in economics attended training and expressed satisfaction with its quality. Above all, professional learning during training was tailored to the elective's content, the process, and the context in which teachers worked, in line with expert recommendations (Guskey, 2009). During training, teachers not only immersed themselves in the professional content and recommended didactic-methodical instructions but also practiced and applied the acquired knowledge through modeled teaching activities and problem tasks. They further exchanged examples with their colleagues and discussed optimal solutions. Such collective participation in training activities and tasks (Desimone & Garet, 2015) constitutes one of the more effective modes of professional learning as it results in more frequent interactions and discussions (Desimone, 2009). During professional learning, teachers also prefer inter-colleague relations in which they exchange ideas, challenges, and questions (Spratt, 2019), as confirmed by our participants. Different educational programs in the domain of economics recommend the application of a constructivist, interactive, and experiential approach to teaching (Amagir et al., 2018; Brancewicz et al., 2014; Canning et al., 2012; Compen et al., 2015; Gönczöl & Bognár, 2012; Kurek et al., 2012; Maier et al., 2012). Such approaches primarily afford

teachers a sense of freedom and autonomy in the practice, which our participants recognized as a crucial characteristic of teaching the *Economics and Business* elective. Inquiry- and project-based learning proved to multiply beneficially to students in terms of their cognitive engagement, maintaining interest in learning, and acquiring emotional and social competences, which aligns with the results of other studies conducted in our country (Malinić et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers of the economics program in Poland emphasized that students showed the greatest interest in projects (Kurek et al., 2012). Similarly, in other European countries such as Lithuania and Scotland, project-based learning is the most common learning method in educational programs in the field of economics (Canning et al., 2012; McGlynn et al., 2012; Muzis et al., 2012). In addition to projects, teachers who participated in this study stated that when covering different economics topics, they relied on practical situations, problem tasks, and play (e.g., role-playing), which is in line with the recommendations of both decision-makers and researchers (OECD, 2019, 2021; Kurek et al., 2012; Šefer, 2018). Our participants particularly emphasized the effectiveness of collaborative learning in small groups, as underscored in the literature (Canning et al., 2012; Gönczöl & Bognár, 2012).

It is useful for grammar school students to learn through cooperation with experts, partner schools, and other actors from the local community. However, some teachers emphasized the lack of resources and time for establishing cooperative relationships with local institutions for student projects. Secondary schools in Poland have recognized the importance of partnerships with experts as well as other schools, the local government, and non-governmental organizations (Kurek et al., 2012). According to these authors, support from the principal and school administration is necessary for students to have opportunities to meet and learn from relevant members of the local community, as echoed by the teachers who participated in our study. Such individuals and institutions have useful knowledge and resources that can elevate the quality of economics education at grammar schools and other secondary schools. Teachers from Scotland (Canning et al., 2012) encourage their students to participate in the activities of companies and small businesses that can be temporary (e.g., individual events where they can meet employers) or more permanent (e.g., visits to small businesses, internships, or jobs).

Teachers from other countries, as well as our participants, experience difficulties organizing classes in the field of economics. The traditional 45-minute classes, insufficient materials and resources, and overly extensive learning content

are some of the challenges faced by teachers from different countries (Canning et al., 2012; OECD, 2014; Kurek et al., 2012). Teachers employed at certain schools in Serbia also recognized inflexible class schedules as an obstacle. However, in some cases, it was noted that there were schools that employed a different approach to temporal class organization (e.g., block scheduling) to enable students to engage in inquiry- and project-based learning.

■ CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to provide a deeper insight into teachers' opinions and experiences regarding the *Economics and Business* elective and its implementation in the third and fourth grades of grammar school. From the teacher perspective, it would seem that the contents encompassed by this program are relevant to student education and that students are interested in acquiring practical and functional knowledge in the field of economics. Likewise, teachers asserted that this elective allows students to develop a critical attitude towards social reality. Teacher preparation for elective program implementation proved meaningful in terms of both the content and the didactic-methodical activities conducted during training. The recommendation to implement inquiry- and project-based learning was recognized as a good didactic-methodical choice that afforded teachers greater organizational freedom and autonomy, while simultaneously motivating students to be more engaged in class. Program preparation and implementation were mostly plagued by organizational challenges.

Having in mind that this study involved teachers who taught one elective at grammar schools, additional insights could be obtained by comparing their observations with the perceptions of teachers of other electives. This would further illuminate the status of elective programs at grammar schools from the perspective of their implementers. The fact that two out of three authors of this paper participated in the training implementation could have affected participants' answers in the segment pertaining to their perception of the training. Thus, it constitutes a limitation of this study, which we sought to overcome by introducing a third, independent evaluator. Suggestions for further research include conducting qualitative and quantitative studies that would provide a deeper understanding and a larger body of knowledge about the effects of elective programs. It would be particularly valuable to conduct

studies that would examine the overlaps and differences between the *intended* (what the education system prescribes), *implemented* (what is implemented in the classroom), and *attained* curricula (student achievement), along with longitudinal studies aimed at monitoring the process components of the elective program in practice over time.

Recommendations for the Improvement of the Elective's Status and Quality

Based on the empirical data, recommendations for further improvement of the status and quality of the *Economics and Business* elective are as follows:

- Organizational issues should be solved systemically to optimize the program's organizational quality (e.g., students could choose one instead of two electives, and the elective could be better positioned within the class schedule).
- Students need to be more thoroughly acquainted with the concept of electivity as the possibility to choose among the programs offered by the school, with students' efforts being evaluated the same as in mandatory subjects and the grade in electives factoring into students' GPAs.
- The education system should provide more opportunities (e.g., forums, conferences, and webinars) for teachers to horizontally exchange their professional experiences with elective program implementation.
- It is necessary to create a database featuring good practice examples in an online environment, so teachers could rely on them when preparing lessons focusing on more abstract concepts.

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