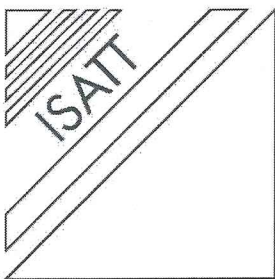
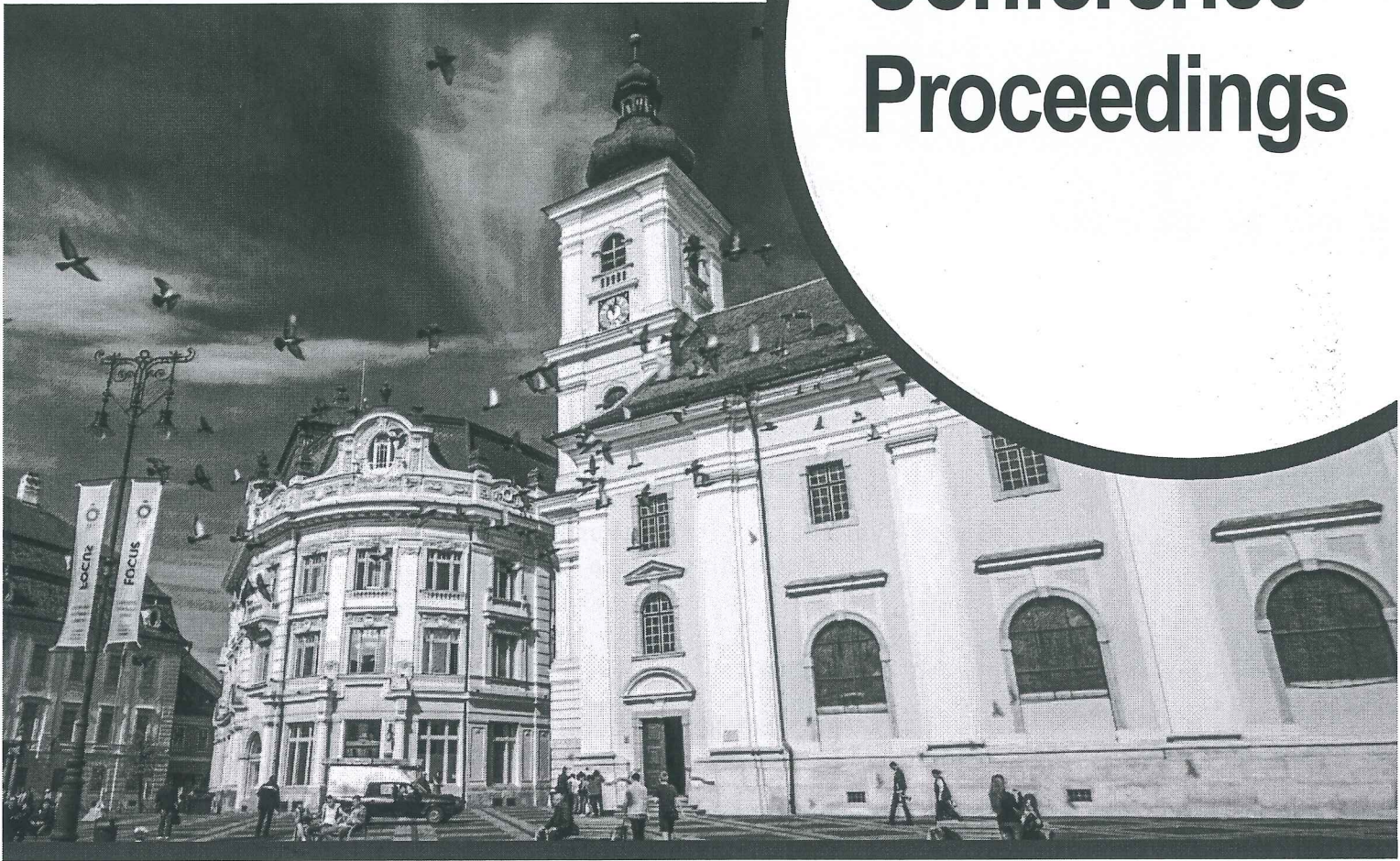


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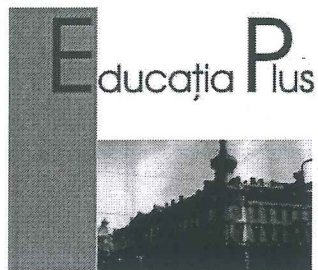
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PROCEEDINGS

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ASSOCIATION ON TEACHERS AND TEACHING (ISATT)**

**"EDUCATION BEYOND THE CRISIS: NEW SKILLS, CHILDREN'S
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SIBIU, ROMANIA

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INCENTIVES AND OBSTACLES IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

¹Renata Čepić, ²Barbara Šteh, ³Jana Kalin

¹University of Rijeka

renata.cepic@uniri.hr

²University of Ljubljana

barbara.steh@ff.uni-lj.si

³University of Ljubljana

jana.kalin@guest.arnes.si

ABSTRACT This article aimed to examine the most important incentives and obstacles teachers face in the process of their professional development and the possible differences between Croatian and Slovenian elementary school teachers according to the years of their teaching experience. Within the framework of the project Teachers' Professional Development, Status, Personality and Transversal Competencies, we designed a questionnaire that was applied to a representative, stratified sample. The study included a total of 1,867 Slovenian and Croatian elementary school classroom and subject teachers. As the greatest incentive, teachers expressed their desire for personal development and professional advancement, while they view the overload with professional tasks and obligations as their greatest obstacle. The research results show similarity in ranking the strongest incentives and obstacles to the professional development of Croatian and Slovenian teachers. Teachers with less work experience more commonly refer to harmonization of personal and professional life as the greatest obstacle, while generalized discouragement (resignation) is more frequently highlighted by teachers with more work experience, which points to the importance of years of service as an important factor in planning a continuous professional development (CPD) program for teachers.

KEYWORDS: elementary school teachers, professional development, incentives, obstacles

INTRODUCTION

The professional development of teachers is essential for the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of education, but also for the encouragement of teachers to devote themselves to their learning. We understand the professional development of teachers as lifelong learning and process during which teachers establish and maintain the highest level of professional competency, which they are capable of achieving (Terhart, 1997). Numerous factors can encourage or prevent the teachers' professional development. In addition to personal factors (attitudes, experience, ability, motivation), contextual factors such as a clear vision and educational institutions' mission, a cooperative culture, an open and inclusive organisational structure, the principal's leadership style, self-education opportunities, as well as policies and resources that support professional development are also of crucial importance.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teachers' professional development is a key issue that lies at the very heart of many studies dealing with the quality and effectiveness of education. In this regard, the fundamental question is how to ensure the achievement of educational needs, conditions, and opportunities as the main prerequisites for teachers' professional development, as well as how to support the curricular modeling of their education. Most authors believe that the professional development of teachers should be considered in light of the social-constructivist theory as a result of the individual's self-activity, which is influenced by personal and professional environmental factors.

Despite recognizing the importance of professional development and the pressures arising from current educational requirements, most of the opportunities for professional development remain fragmented, insufficiently linked to the curriculum, and inappropriate to the teachers' needs, requirements, and opportunities. Professional development does not happen in a vacuum or according to a clearly defined scheme; instead, there are fluctuations in the progress within each career period and different paths of development depending on the interaction of internal and external factors for each individual (Huberman, 1993; Javrh, 2008). However, there is insufficient knowledge about the teachers' learning

opportunities or how forms of activity change during their career (Corcoran, 2007). Empirical research on teacher participation in professional development has identified age-related differences (e.g., Desimone, 2009; Desimone, Smith and Ueno, 2006). For example, Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, and Baumert (2014) explored the participation of teachers in formal and informal forms of professional learning, taking thereby into account the content of the learning, and they concluded that older teachers are less involved in professional development and training. In the context of the aforementioned, it can be noted that internal and external educational conditions are interdependent and, therefore, need to be aligned to be more effective. Incentives and obstacles are significant indicators of the existing educational conditions and opportunities for teacher participation in the process of professional development. This paper presents the results of an analysis carried out within the framework of broader research that was part of the project Teachers' Professional Development: Status, Personality and Transversal Competencies (Čepić & Kalin, 2017). This paper aims to examine the most significant incentives and obstacles which teachers face in the process of their professional development. We are interested in the possible differences between Croatian and Slovenian elementary school teachers according to the years of their teaching experience.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research survey was conducted on a representative sample of elementary school teachers in Croatia and Slovenia. The stratified sample included 10% of schools, selected using a randomized algorithm from the school list. A total of 1,867 teachers filled out the questionnaire correctly, of which 1,103 (59.1%) were Croatian and 764 (40.9%) were Slovenian. A total of 1,052 (56.3 %) Croatian and 742 (39.7 %) Slovenian teachers answered the question about incentives and a total of 1,030 (55.2%) Croatian and 710 (38 %) Slovenian teachers answered the question about obstacles concerning the whole research sample. Regarding gender, female teachers dominate in both samples: 83.7% in the Croatian and 89.2% in the Slovenian sample. According to the teacher career development, based on the Huberman model and S-model (Huberman, 1993; Javrh, 2008), we first grouped teachers into five categories with regards to the years of their work experience. However, due to the small representation of the final two categories, we divided the participants into three groups with regards to the years of work experience: a) up to six years, b) between seven and 18 years, and c) 19 years and above. The data collection instrument covered a wide range of socio-demographic variables and measures and the items referring to incentives and obstacles were designed based on a review of theory and previous research on teachers' professional activity. On the list of 10 offered incentives, the respondents had the option of selecting only one as the strongest incentive for their professional development. On the list of nine offered obstacles, they could choose only one as the greatest obstacle to their professional development. This paper presents the results related to a descriptive analysis of responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the similarity in the ranking of the strongest incentives for the professional development of Croatian and Slovenian teachers. Both Croatian and Slovenian teachers expressed the *desire for personal development* (32.1% : 37.2%) as the strongest incentive for professional development have, which was followed by *demanding and diverse students* (18.8% : 17%) and *clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level* (12.2% : 15.9%). Also, the importance of *mutual collaboration and support from colleagues* (10.3% : 12.1%) cannot be neglected. In both subsamples, teachers rarely chose *to acquire a greater reputation* as a significant factor in professional development. Furthermore, we were interested in whether Croatian and Slovenian teachers differ in the response frequency to some of the strongest incentives for professional development with regards to work experience. The answers are quite similar between Slovenian and Croatian teachers. In all three groups, Croatian teachers most often mentioned the *desire for personal development and demanding and diverse students* as a significant factor in the professional development. For teachers with up to 6 and 19 and more years of work experience, *clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level* (with 12.2% and 15% of choice) takes the third place. Among the teachers who have between 7 and 18 years of work experience, the third place is taken by *mutual collaboration and support from colleagues* (10.4%); however, *clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level* (9.6%) is also an

important incentive in this group. It is interesting to note that, at the beginning of the career, there is a greater incentive for professional development *innovative and quality work of colleagues*, while in the later period it is *positive experiences of previous education and requirements of changed curricula, regulations, and legal provisions*.

| <i>The strongest incentives for professional development according to Croatian and Slovenian teachers</i> | CRO | | SLO | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | <i>f</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>f</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Desire for personal development, progress | 338 | 32.1 | 276 | 37.2 |
| Demanding and diverse students, working with students with special needs | 198 | 18.8 | 126 | 17 |
| Clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level | 128 | 12.2 | 118 | 15.9 |
| Mutual collaboration and support from colleagues | 108 | 10.3 | 90 | 12.1 |
| Positive experiences of previous education | 88 | 8.4 | 52 | 7 |
| Requirements of changed curricula, regulations, and legal provisions | 63 | 6 | 25 | 3.4 |
| Innovative and quality work of colleagues | 47 | 4.5 | 18 | 2.4 |
| Professional advancement | 39 | 3.7 | 9 | 1.2 |
| Encouragement from school leadership | 23 | 2.2 | 19 | 2.6 |
| Acquiring greater reputation | 20 | 1.9 | 9 | 1.2 |
| Total | 1052 | 100 | 742 | 100 |

Table 1: The strongest incentives for professional development

In all three working groups, Slovenian teachers chose *the desire for personal development, demanding and diverse students* and *clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level* as the top three most important incentives for professional development. In the group of up to 6 years of work experience, teachers find *mutual collaboration and support from colleagues* as an important incentive, which is also ranked third. It is apparent that the *desire for personal development* is more common among teachers with less work experience but less common among teachers with more work experience. On the other hand, teachers with less work experience, compared to those with more work experience, rarely highlight *demanding and diverse students*, and *clearly defined professional development goals at the personal level* as the strongest incentives.

Most of the Croatian and Slovenian teachers (25.2% and 38%) identified the *overload with professional tasks and obligations* as the greatest obstacle to professional development (Table 2). As the second greatest obstacle, Croatian and Slovenian teachers refer to *general societal discouragement (resignation)* (18.9% and 16.9%), followed by 16.8% of Croatian teachers referring to a *lack of appropriate in-service education and training programs*, and 13.8% of Slovenian teachers highlighting *difficulties in harmonizing personal and professional life*. *Lack of appropriate in-service education and training programs* was ranked fourth by Slovenian teachers (11.8%), while this place is occupied by *difficulties in harmonizing personal and professional life* in the sample of Croatian teachers (11.7%).

| <i>The greatest obstacles to professional development according to Croatian and Slovenian teachers</i> | CRO | | SLO | |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | <i>f</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>f</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Overload with professional tasks and obligations | 260 | 25.2 | 270 | 38 |
| General societal discouragement (resignation) | 195 | 18.9 | 120 | 16.9 |
| Lack of appropriate in-service education and training programs | 173 | 16.8 | 84 | 11.8 |
| Difficulties in harmonizing personal and professional life | 120 | 11.7 | 98 | 13.8 |
| Requirements of changed curricula, regulations, and legal provisions | 111 | 10.8 | 60 | 8.5 |
| Inadequate system of professional advancements | 77 | 7.5 | 18 | 2.5 |
| Nobody appreciates my quality work | 48 | 4.7 | 19 | 2.7 |
| Poor support from school leadership | 32 | 3.1 | 23 | 3.2 |
| Poor interpersonal cooperation and limited support from colleagues | 14 | 1.4 | 18 | 2.5 |
| Total | 1030 | 100 | 710 | 100 |

Table 2: The greatest obstacles to professional development

Compared to the Croatian sample, a significantly higher share of Slovenian teachers reported *overload with professional tasks and obligations* as the greatest obstacle. On the other hand, a slightly larger share of Croatian teachers compared to the Slovenian sample reported *lack of appropriate in-service education and training programs* (16.8% : 11.8%) and *inadequate system of professional advancements* (7.5% : 2.5%) as the greatest obstacle. A particular problem is the *general societal discouragement (resignation)*, which teachers point out as one of the greatest obstacles that adversely affect their professional development. A probable cause should be sought in the teachers' opinion about the insufficient evaluation of their work, which is to a certain extent related to the overall unfavourable social and material circumstances of the education system.

Both the Slovenian and Croatian teachers, regardless of their work experience, highlight *overload with professional tasks and obligations* as the greatest obstacle. However, Slovenian teachers point this out to a much more significant degree than Croatian teachers (38% : 25.2%). Croatian teachers, and especially Slovenian teachers, point to the fact that younger teachers find *difficulties in harmonizing personal and professional life* as a great obstacle. That was stated by 21.1% of Slovenian teachers and 14.2% of Croatian teachers with the least work experience, and only by 8.6% of Slovenian teachers and 10.3% of Croatian teachers with more than 19 years of work experience. Slovenian teachers further demonstrate that teachers with less work experience repeatedly referred to the *lack of appropriate in-service education and training programs* as an obstacle compared to teachers with more work experience (14.4% : 9.5%).

The opposite trend is evident, in terms of work experience, between Croatian and Slovenian teachers with regards to *general societal discouragement (resignation)*. This factor seems to be the greatest obstacle to professional development to a significantly higher number of teachers with 19 and more years of work experience (23.5% of Croatian and 21.9% of Slovenian teachers) compared to teachers who have up to 6 years of work experience (12.1 % of Croatian and 12.2% of Slovenian teachers).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the conducted analysis showed a similar understanding of the strongest incentives and greatest obstacles between Croatian and Slovenian teachers, although there are some differences between them and among the groups considering the work experience. Teachers find the desire for personal development as the strongest incentive for professional development and the overload in professional tasks and obligations as the greatest obstacle. Based on results we conclude that attention should be paid to the following issues. Firstly, the awareness of educational needs may exist, but they cannot be realized without proper conditions. Secondly, it is necessary to identify the existing conditions for the teachers' professional development, whether the existing conditions could be better used or even modified. Thirdly, in the curriculum planning of the teachers' professional development, it is necessary to start from the educational needs, conditions, and opportunities of the potential participants and organizers of the educational process. Without this, only short-term, limited, and improvised activities remain. The results clearly show that teachers need to be protected from work overload. Indeed, it is important to ensure the circumstances and the time required for teachers' professional development, relieve them of certain obligations and empower them to make meaningful plans of their obligations and select priorities for more quality work and personal life.

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