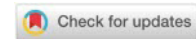


# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS IN AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL-PREFERENCES, PARTICIPATION AND EXPERIENCE WITH DIFFERENT FORMS OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

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**Abstract:** The current reform processes of modern school systems have been going on for decades with the aim of implementing inclusive education. Accordingly, modern pedagogical research in recent decades has focused on the study and modeling of the system of professional development of teachers. A professional development teacher represents a long-term and consistent process of developing teacher awareness of what he does, why he does it, but also identifies mechanisms by which he can improve his work and himself personally (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Day, 1999; Kostović, 2003). In this continuous process of development, from primary education and throughout the working life, professional development is a way through which teachers improve their work, progress and expand their roles in the modern school. Professional development in work is seen as a complex, continuous process of acquisition, enrichment and systematic adoption of new knowledge, skills and necessities necessary for the realization of increasingly complex teaching roles. The aim of this paper is to look at the dominant characteristics of professional development (teacher preferences, diversity and representation of certain forms of professional development) from the perspective of teachers themselves. The sample consists of 265 primary school teachers in the Republic of Serbia, Vojvodina province. A questionnaire was constructed for the needs of the research. The results of research on the parameter of participation and experience with numerous forms of professional development show that most teachers have experience with each of the forms of professional development defined by the Rulebook on Continuing Professional Development and Advancement as Teachers, Educators and Professional Associates in the Republic of Serbia (Sl. Glasnik RS, No. 48/2018). The ranking of the prevalence of forms of professional development of teachers in the sample shows that the most common forms are: participation in current school projects and seminars. In assessing the usefulness of certain forms of professional development, all forms are generally highly rated. Teachers, however, find it somewhat more useful to take forms of training with a dominant practical dimension: consultation, exchange of experience or solving current problems with colleagues; attendance at demonstration classes of colleagues and professional and study visits to schools. The final part of the paper emphasizes the importance of the obtained results in the context of contributing to a more purposeful and efficient system of professional development of teachers, its adaptation and revision according to the needs of teachers and achieving quality education for all children.

Keywords: inclusive school, professional development of teachers, modalities of professional development

Field: Social sciences and Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the school and social context, a kind of social and professional engagement is expected from the “inclusive teacher”, so in this light socio-culturally oriented authors advocate the teacher’s agency as a concept through which the teacher’s readiness to implement inclusive education could be understood (Pantić, 2017; Li & Ruppert, 2020; Priestley & Drew, 2019). Through the prism of inclusive education, some authors (Li & Ruppert, 2020) describe teacher agency as a temporally and socioculturally situated and mediated process of social engagement that has five key aspects: ideology, identity, reflexivity, competencies and teacher autonomy. Teacher reflexivity, constant research and re-examination of one’s own practice in order to jointly promote the profession and the development of the institution, is presented as an imperative in a large number of current relevant documents (Key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014; Council Recommendation on Key Competences for LifeLong Learning, 2018). One of the key elements in most serious and promising educational reforms is the professional development of teachers, and society is finally recognizing that teachers are the most important agents of change in these reforms. This dual role of teachers in educational reforms - both

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subjects and objects of change - makes the field of teacher professional development a growing and challenging area, and in light of this, it has attracted much attention from researchers in recent years. If effective introduction of changes is a priority in the school, then the entire team must be initiated towards identifying the needs for changes, pressures and resistance that will occur in relation to changes, planning strategies for introducing changes, the content of changes and the implementation process in each member's own and work collective. It can be said that we are talking about the macro-context of changes and micro-factors (institutional and personal factors related to changes). In the context of the mentioned changes, demands for changes in the approach to education and teacher training are taking shape. In addition, since the quality of the school is an imperative for reforms in education, it is also necessary through the education policy, as well as the improvement of specific conditions in schools, to enable teachers to develop professionally, learn and improve (Tančić, 2022).

For members of educational authorities and bearers of changes in educational practice, data on difficulties and obstacles at different levels of functioning of the inclusion implementation system were expected at the beginning of its implementation (Đermanov et al., 2012). However, the authors note (Tančić, 2022; Hebib et al., 2019) that although inclusion has been at the center of international education policy for three decades and represents a key reform ambition, inclusive education is still accompanied by certain doubts, uncertainty and conflicting opinions. On the one hand, there is strong support for inclusion and the achievement of the social goals of upbringing and education, with an extremely positive attitude of the participants of educational activities, and on the other hand, there are increasingly frequent counter arguments of the opponents of inclusive education that the regular schooling system is not adequately prepared for the implementation of inclusion. and it is very difficult to achieve. As a result, tensions inevitably arise within and between the three levels of the system: at the macro level of the functioning of the educational system, at the level of the school as an organization and at the level of the individual (Đermanov et al., 2012; Michailakis&Reich, 2009). In addition to what has been said, it is an interesting and significant observation by some authors that the sensitization of teachers, as well as the development of professional skills, is actually the result of teaching in an inclusive environment (Begeny&Martens, 2007; Waldron&McLeskey, 2010).

The effectiveness and quality of inclusive education is subject to evaluation in different ways. The results of the research thus show that the development of a positive attitude of teachers towards students who need additional support and inclusive education is largely contributed by adequate training and professional and organizational support, which teachers receive at the school and educational system level (Arnaiz-Sánchez, 2023; Hebib et al., 2019; Lambe & Bones, 2007; Tait & Purdie, 2000). Therefore, in order to achieve better effects of inclusive education, teachers need to be additionally empowered, through the organization of more diverse professional development programs.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the research was to examine the preferences, experience and teachers' assessment of the usefulness of the most frequent forms of professional development. In the structure of the sample, there are 204 (77%) female respondents and 53 (20%) male respondents, aged from 25 to 62 years (AS = 44.94; SD = 9.07) and work experience from 0.42 to 40 years (AS = 16.88 ; SD = 9.76). Although it can be seen from the given data that the sample is unbalanced in terms of the gender and age structure of the respondents, it well represents the population of teachers employed in primary education in the Republic of Serbia. The data on the level of education of teachers show that the sample is quite homogeneous according to this characteristic, which is expected, since the minimum level of education for teachers in schools is regulated by legal regulations (it is higher education - basic academic studies (48.3%), according to the previously valid programs and educational nomenclature, that is, master's degree studies, as their equivalent, according to the current educational legislation (42.3%).

The presented results are part of a wider research. The two-stage convenience sample consists of 265 primary school teachers in the Republic of Serbia, province of Vojvodina. The results presented are part of a wider research conducted on a deliberate sample of ten elementary schools, from the territory of the city of Novi Sad, province of Vojvodina. The schools in the sample were selected based on the criteria of a high level of achievement of inclusiveness standards, external evaluation reports, and selected. Within the selected schools, the choice of respondents in the sample is random and consists of 265 classroom teachers and subject classes. Final research which was carried out in the period March-June 2019, was preceded by a preliminary one, in operation comprehensibility and content validity checks items in the questionnaire, assessment of metric characteristics and reliability of constructed scales.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The variable professional development of teachers is operationalized through indicators: frequency of teacher participation, type of professional development and evaluation of the usefulness of different forms of professional development of teachers. Based on the data in Table 1, it can be seen that the frequency of teacher participation by individual forms of professional development ranges from min. 56% to 85%, which shows that most teachers have experience with each of the mentioned forms of professional development.

Table 1. Forms of professional development of teachers according to frequency of attendance and assessment of their usefulness

Types and forms of professional development	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>Utility assessment AS (SD)</i>
Attending the trial classes of colleagues	207 (78,1)	2,43 (0,58)
Seminars	220 (83,0)	2,34 (0,55)
Participation in current school projects	226 (85,3)	2,27 (0,62)
Attendance and participation in professional panels, conferences, congresses	186 (70,2)	2,27 (0,57)
Attendance and participation in teacher forums or other types of horizontal learning	162 (61,1)	2,26 (0,57)
Professional and study visits to schools	142 (55,5)	2,41 (0,62)
Monitoring of pedagogical and professional literature	178 (67,2)	2,35 (0,58)
Consultations, exchange of experience or solving current problems with colleagues	208 (78,5)	2,65 (0,50)

Note: The usefulness rating is rated on a scale of 1 to 3.

The ranking of the distribution of forms of professional development of teachers in the sample shows that the most widespread forms are: participation in current school projects (85.3%) and seminars (83%). Second in rank are attendance at colleagues' trial classes (78.1%), consultations and exchange of experience or solving current problems with colleagues (78.5) and attendance and participation in expert panels, conferences, congresses (70.2%). The least widespread forms, in the sample of our respondents, are following pedagogical and professional literature (67.2%), attendance and participation in teachers' forums or other types of horizontal learning (61.1%), and professional and study visits to schools (55.5%). Based on the obtained data, we can conclude that of all forms of professional development of teachers, school projects and seminars are the most represented. We assume that it is so because the school projects are organized by the school or other institutions and organizations, as well as seminars, which is why the entrepreneurship of the teacher is not of crucial importance. In addition, activating colleagues and participating in projects or seminars can stimulate other teachers. Consultations, exchange of experiences or solving current problems with colleagues is a slightly less common form of teacher professional development, but also common. This information has a logical sequence, if we take into account the data we obtained through the survey, which confirm that the teachers who participated in our research have an open relationship with their colleagues and are ready for cooperation. Attending the trial classes of colleagues is also one of the ways of professional development of teachers that is represented to a greater extent. A slightly smaller percentage of teachers declared that they often attend and participate in professional forums, conferences and congresses. Like projects and seminars, these training methods are organized by the school or some other institution, which is why teachers can have external motivation. It is interesting to note that following pedagogical and professional literature is not such a popular way of professional training for teachers. Attendance and participation in teachers' forums or other forms is also not as common a way of teacher training. The least common form of teacher training is professional and study visits to schools. It follows that teachers are more open to cooperation with colleagues in the school where they work compared to colleagues from other schools. We assume that this is preceded by better relationships with colleagues who exude trust.

In assessing the usefulness of certain forms of professional development on a scale of 1-3; categories (1) "not useful", (2) "useful", (3) "very useful", all forms are generally rated high (min. value AS=2.26). However, teachers consider forms with a dominant praxeological dimension somewhat more useful (TALIS, 2013; Korać, 2020): consultations, exchange of experience or solving current problems

with colleagues (AS= 2.65, SD= 0.50); attendance at colleagues' trial classes (AS= 2.43, SD= 0.58); and professional and study visits to schools (AS= 2.41, SD= 0.63). Seminars and monitoring of pedagogical and professional literature are positioned in second place, in terms of usefulness, while they are relatively least valued: participation in school projects, debates, congresses and teachers' forums. On the comparative display of both indicators (Graph 1), it can be seen that (participation in school projects), the form of training in which respondents predominantly participate, is considered the least useful.

Table 2. Programs that teachers attended most often

Program name (K1-K4)	N	(%)
Authority - that difficult word	26	5.0
Digital classroom	26	5.0
Digital competences of teachers	25	4.8
E classroom	25	4.8
Inclusion	<b>70</b>	<b>13.4</b>
Outcomes-oriented teaching	28	5.3
Evaluation in function of further development and advancement of students	<b>35</b>	<b>6.7</b>
Support for child development	<b>46</b>	<b>8.8</b>

Seminars as the dominant form of teacher training (frequency ranking) were more fully examined in the research, in order to identify the preferences and areas of competence in which teachers were most often trained. Through an open-ended question, teachers were asked to list the programs they participated in during the last two years. Based on the production of teachers' answers, it can be concluded that of the 50 programs that the teachers mentioned, those programs cover all normatively defined competence areas (K1-K4). Among the programs most frequently attended by teachers (Table 3), three programs stand out thematically: Inclusion (13.4%), Support for children's development (8.8%) and Assessment for the further development and advancement of students (6.7%).

Table 3. Programs in the area of support for student personality development and communication and cooperation

Programs (K3, K4)	N	(%)
That every child learns easily	3	.6
A gifted student at school	13	2.5
IOP	6	1.1
Building good relationships as a prevention factor	2	.4
Inklusion	70	13.4
Outcomes-oriented teaching	28	5.3
Montessori program at school	17	3.2
Emotional intelligence	11	2.1
Violence	17	3.2
Learning difficulties	4	.8
Developing social skills at school	9	1.7
Support for child development	46	8.8
Summary	<b>226</b>	<b>43.1</b>

According to the fact that the competence of the teacher is a prerequisite for successful work with students who need additional support in learning, it is necessary to develop the awareness of the importance of different competencies aimed at the field of inclusive education among the teachers of class and subject classes, but also to provide them with a quality offer of professional programs in with the aim of more adequate preparation for working with students and improving inclusive practice (Matović & Spasenović, 2016). By listening and meeting the needs of those who implement inclusive education, spreading successful inclusive practices and providing continuous support, better readiness of teachers to act in accordance with the requirements of an inclusive approach to education is ensured (Milošević & Maksimović, 2022). It is known that the diversity of professional training program offerings is the result of efforts made by society and the educational system to strengthen teacher competencies and knowledge, which were not sufficiently developed during initial education. However, only participation in various forms of professional development, although necessary, is not a sufficient condition to develop the necessary competencies. New knowledge and skills, which teachers know from experience, cannot be easily or simply transformed and applied in specific school conditions (Tančić, 2022).

## 4. CONCLUSION

Teacher training is a fundamental element in responding to the new educational challenges posed by the present 21st-century society, since it is one of the key factors in improving the professional competence of every teacher, as it contributes to the development of equitable and quality education (UNESCO, 2017). Both in society and increasingly in classrooms characterized by pluralism, which are heterogeneous, ensuring quality responses of the educational system implies respect for differences between students at multiple levels and aspects. Teacher training is one of the main elements by which the inclusion of all students in the classroom can be established and made a reality and can thus encourage the development of truly inclusive educational centers (Friesen & Cuning, 2020). In the light of promoting fair and quality education, we need teachers trained and sensitized to the concept of inclusive education. The lack of adequate initial teacher education is one of the main obstacles to inclusion, as confirmed by research (Arnaiz-Sánchez, 2023). At the same time, the role of educational authorities and administration in creating and improving programs that enable theoretical-practical training, applied in the context of educational systems and immediate practice, should be analyzed in more detail. There is a need to review the existing teacher training model. This requires abandoning the deficit model and future research should consider inclusion as an essential value in training plans and reflective practice (Arnaiz-Sánchez, 2023). For all these reasons, the system of initial education of future teachers must be reviewed by the educational authorities, with the aim of materializing the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which reads "Guarantee inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2017). The obtained research results contribute to a more purposeful and efficient system of professional training of teachers, its adjustment and revision according to the needs of teachers and the realization of quality education for all children and reflective practices.

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