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Teachers' Attitudes towards Mandatory and Optional Professional Development Programmes in the Republic of Serbia

Abstract

This study focuses on teachers' professional development practices in the Republic of Serbia, presenting the results obtained from questionnaires of mixed research conducted to investigate teachers' attitudes towards different forms of professional development programmes, how often teachers participate in them, and why. The results show a high degree of correlation between their positive attitudes and the frequency of participation when teachers are externally motivated, and no correlation if they self-direct their professional development. The research draws attention to the need to re-examine the existing teacher professional development policies considering the needs of teachers and their teaching practices.

Keywords: teachers' professional development, attitudes, mandatory and optional professional programmes, motivation

Introduction

In May 2018, the Council of the EU adopted a recommendation that includes eight competencies important for every individual endeavouring to actively participate in social/civic life, and progress on professional and personal levels. Based on creativity, critical thinking, risk assessment, emotion control, constructiveness, and creativity, etc. (Marsh et al., 2011, p. 11), these competencies should be of prime concern for policymakers and practitioners. These competencies include

communication in native and foreign languages, mathematical competence, basic competencies in science and technology, digital competence, social and civic competencies, learning to learn, a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression (European Commission, 2019). Teachers' professional development is integral to every teacher's path and contributes to developing the mentioned competencies. The interrelation of internal motivation and external and organisational factors is emphasised as an important prerequisite for affecting the development of a teacher (Postholm, 2012).

In the Republic of Serbia, The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (2021, Article 142) foresees the mandatory education of pre-service teachers in psychology, pedagogy and methodology. Although by obtaining the license, a teacher has done a significant job, this activity represents only the first step in a series of tasks that pave the way for the continuous professional development of teachers (Hollenweger & Krompak, 2018).

The significance of professional development has been highlighted by many authors (Creemers et al., 2013; Gavranović & Prodanović, 2021; Vadivel et al., 2021); still, there is a challenge of engaging educators and teachers in relevant and meaningful professional development practices that will lead to improved student learning outcomes (Fairman et al., 2020). The research conducted by Orlović et al. (2020, pp. 147) points to a discrepancy existing between the offer of professional development programmes and teachers' needs; they advocate the introduction of more professional training programmes on the one hand, and, on the other, the reexamination and evaluation of the existing programmes in compliance with teachers' and educators' needs. On the other hand, there is also a need to approach the issue of teachers' professional development with more understanding and correlation between the practitioners and researchers, focusing on the outcome of professional development and its impact on the quality of teaching (Postholm, 2018). Research conducted to determine professional learning outcomes focused on knowledge gained from professional learning, developed skills, and teachers' attitudes towards professional learning (Nordengren, 2020).

Beara and Jerković (2015) wrote about teachers' attitudes towards professional development and concluded that teachers, to a significant extent, are not completely satisfied with how it is organised in Serbia, and believe that past circumstances were more favourable for their professional development. Findings proposed by Sancar et al. (2021) point to the crucial and multidimensional role professional development plays in different contexts, with varying goals and changes across a teacher's professional life. Thus, the newly created educational contexts, considerably modified by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, made about 100

million teachers and their students in the world leave the framework of teaching and learning known at that time, greatly influencing changes in approaches, methods, techniques and teaching practices (Prodanović & Gavranović, 2021a; 2021b; Beara et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers' professional development programmes must comply with teachers' needs and contexts where they teach (Kedzior & Fifield, 2004).

Despite clearly formulated regulations on professional training, numerous and diverse accredited seminars, conferences, webinars and other forms of training offered to teachers, teachers have different views on what professional training should include and how it should be organised. This paper focuses on the professional development of teachers employed in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia. This research aims to examine teachers' attitudes towards professional development and investigate the frequency of respondents' participation in mandatory and optional forms of professional development. The main tasks of the research are to determine: how often respondents participate in mandatory and optional professional development programmes organised in the institution where they work and outside it; what motivates them to participate in given programmes; to what extent the respondents agree with the defined standards of teacher competences, and what is the correlation between the opinions of the respondents and the frequency of participation of the respondents in various forms of professional development.

Research Methodology

In the Republic of Serbia, after the internship and introduction to the teaching job, a teacher should be able to independently carry out educational and professional activities, on one hand, and, at the same time, be prepared to pass the examination for the license (Regulation on the license for the work of educators, teachers and professional associates, 2022, Articles 1–3). The research was conducted with 84 teachers, who took additional teacher training from 2017 to 2021 because they needed a certificate confirming their teaching competencies. This certificate is a formal pre-requisite for taking the state exam for obtaining a teaching license prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

In order to examine the attitudes and frequency of respondents' participation in different types of professional training programmes, we used an online survey questionnaire as an instrument specially created for this empirical research. The questionnaire consists of several parts: the first contains basic information about

the respondents (gender, years of teaching experience, the school where they work and the subject they teach). The second part contains statements that examine the frequency (how often the respondents participate in forms of professional development), the source of motivation (whether the respondents search for training programmes themselves, or they do it because the institution where they work sends them) and the choice of places where the forms professional development (within or outside the institution where they work). Additionally, this section's last question examines why teachers enrolled in the training course. The third part of the questionnaire contains 5 statements that examine respondents' attitudes towards teacher competencies. The last part of the questionnaire contains two questions – one examines the attitude of teachers towards current practices of teacher professional programmes in the Republic of Serbia and the other, an open-ended question, in which teachers define the concept of professional development.

We used the survey containing statements on a five-point Likert scale. The minimum, maximum and mean values with standard deviation are calculated for each question. The answers to respondents' attitudes and the frequency of participation and the attitudes and independent variables were cross-referenced. Spearman's correlation coefficient was used and the degree of correlation between these variables was calculated; the results were subsequently descriptively analysed and evaluated.

The answers to the open-ended question were analysed and categorised according to the common denominator and then interpreted in relation to the description of lifelong learning as defined in the Rulebook on continuous professional development and advancement in the profession of teachers, educators and professional associates (2021).

The instrument (scale) contains 5 items and proved reliable with a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.91, which is higher than the minimum of 0.70 recommended by Nanelli (1979). It consists of the following attitudes to which respondents answered on a scale of agreement from 1 to 5: *The teacher should be competent in the teaching area and the subject they teach, The teacher should be competent in the area of teaching methodology, The teacher should be competent in the area of learning and teaching, The teacher should be competent in providing support for the development of the student's personality, and The teacher should be competent in organising classes in which communication and cooperation among students are encouraged.*

Results and Data Analysis

The research involved 84 teachers employed in 46 schools – 14 primary and 32 secondary schools (23 vocational and 9 grammar schools) in 16 cities in the Republic of Serbia. Among the respondents, 61.9% were females and 38.1% were males; 58.3% taught professional subjects and 41.7% general subjects (biology, IT, art, physics, chemistry, languages, and history). Regarding the number of years of work experience, more than half of the respondents have less than 5 years of experience in education (35.7% less than 2 years and 23.8% between 2 and 5 years), 21.4% have between 5 and 10 years of experience working in a school, and almost a fifth (19%) have more than 10 years of experience.

Table 1 shows the first set of statements from the questionnaire, and it provides statistical data obtained from the analysis of the answers reflecting teachers' attitudes towards mandatory and optional forms of professional development programmes.

Table 1. The frequency of teachers' participation in PD programmes

		<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	I participate in professional development programmes organised in my school.	84	1	5	4,1	0,11	1,01
2	I participate in professional development programmes outside my institution (when the school sends me)	84	1	5	3,74	0,13	1,22
3	I look for accredited forms of professional development programmes.	84	1	5	3,02	0,13	1,19
4	I organise peer-training PD activities with my colleagues.	84	1	5	3,48	0,10	0,94
5	In addition to formal forms of professional development, I try to improve my own knowledge and teaching competencies in other ways.	84	1	5	3,87	0,10	0,93

Table 2 shows the second set of statements (6–11) from the questionnaire created under the standards prescribed by the Rulebook that define the characteristics of a competent teacher.

When asked why they enrolled in pedagogic-psychological-methodical training, 76.2% of respondents answered that they enrolled in the training because they needed the formal certificate, while significantly less, 20.2% stated that they enrolled in the training because they wanted to improve their knowledge in these areas. 3 respondents opted for the third offered option 'other', but did not state the reason for this.

Table 2. Teachers' attitudes towards teacher's competences

		<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>SD</i>
6	A teacher should be competent in the subject he/she teaches.	84	3	5	4,67	0,06	0,52
7	A teacher should be competent in the field of teaching methodology.	84	3	5	4,46	0,06	0,57
8	A teacher should be competent in the field of learning and teaching.	84	3	5	4,52	0,06	0,57
9	A teacher should be competent in supporting the development of a student's personality.	84	3	5	4,5	0,07	0,61
10	A teacher should be competent in organising classes in which student communication and cooperation are encouraged.	84	3	5	4,58	0,06	0,56

Table 3 shows the values of the correlations between the attitudes expressed by respondents regarding teacher competencies (overall value) and the results that show how often they participate in professional development programmes (Statements 3, 4, 5 from Table 1) when teachers independently initiate professional development. There is a positive medium-strong correlation ($r = 0.438$) with statistical significance between the attitude expressed in Statement 5 and the overall value related to respondents' opinions about teacher competencies. However, the absence of correlation between Statements 3 and 4 on the one hand and respondents' overall attitude about teacher competencies came as an interesting result.

Table 3. Correlation between frequency of participation in PD programmes and the overall attitude about teacher competencies

	Statement 3	Statement 4	Statement 5	Overall value (attitudes about teacher competencies)
Statement 3	1	0,32**	0,37**	0,18
Statement 4		1	0,46**	0,17
Statement 5			1	0,44**
Overall value (attitudes about teacher competencies)				1

* $p < 0,05$. ** $p < 0,01$

Table 4 shows the correlation (Spearman) between the values of respondents' years of experience working in schools and the frequency of participation in differ-

ent forms of professional development (Statements 1–5 from Table 1). The results show a statistically significant small positive correlation between the years of experience and the value of attitudes expressed in Statement 1 ($r = 0.15$) and Statement 2 ($r = 0.24$). The results show a small correlation without statistical significance regarding the relationship between other attitudes and years of teaching experience.

Table 4. Correlation between years of teaching experience and frequency of participating in PD

	Years of teaching experience	Statement 1	Statement 2	Statement 3	Statement 4	Statement 5
Years of teaching experience	1	0,15*	0,24*	0,16	0,07	0,13
1		1	0,68**	0,37**	0,32**	0,44**
2			1	0,34**	0,35**	0,41**
3				1	0,32**	0,37**
4					1	0,46**
5						1

* $p < 0,05$. ** $p < 0,01$

Table 5 shows respondents' answers to whether teachers' professional development is well-regulated in the Republic of Serbia. These are crossmatched with the years of teaching experience, and the calculation of the χ^2 test suggests statistically significant differences between the groups. Only 20 respondents answered that PD is well-regulated, while almost half (41) gave a negative answer. The remaining 23 respondents circled the third option and expressed no opinion.

Table 5. The answer to the question: "Teachers' professional development in Serbia is well-regulated", and crossmatched with the years of teaching experience

Years of teaching experience	The number of respondents who answered, 'Yes'	The number of respondents who answered, 'No'	The number of respondents who answered, 'I do not have an opinion'	Total
0–2	3	11	6	20
3–5	13	8	8	29
6–10	2	10	5	17
more than 10	2	12	4	18
Total	20	41	23	84

Discussion

The results of the research show that the respondents agree to a high degree with the views that a competent teacher should have knowledge in the field he teaches, but also knowledge in the field of methodology, pedagogy, and psychology and to be competent to encourage good communication and cooperation among students. High mean values for statements 6–10 indicate that respondents' attitudes, to a high degree, comply with the defined standards describing desired teaching competencies. Descriptive statistics show that teachers most often participate in forms of training organised within the institution or represent informal forms when teachers improve their knowledge in other ways. The lowest mean value (3.02) indicates that teachers are the least motivated to search for accredited professional development forms and found in the Professional Development Catalogue. Even though the respondents know the importance of developing teacher competencies, the analysis shows that respondents do not participate in all forms of professional development similarly. Respondents most often participate in professional development programmes organised within their school and outside their institution, but then the motivation, in that case, is external. The statement that examines the extent to which teachers search for accredited professional development forms found in the Professional Development Catalogue has the lowest mean value. These results show that the internal motivation for professional development is stronger when teachers choose informal forms of development and that the offered programmes that are accredited and are offered for teachers do not motivate them. There is a connection between the attitudes and the frequency of respondents' participation in forms of professional behaviour for all the mentioned forms from the questionnaire, except for the claim that the respondents themselves search for programmes found in the Professional Development Programme, where the Pearson correlation coefficient is low.

The analysis of the answers to the question of how the respondents describe the concept of professional development shows that the most frequent words and phrases used in the answers are: *continuous learning, advancement and improvement, upgrading of existing knowledge and expertise, enhancing competencies, self-improvement, new methods, professional advancement*. In addition to these most common elements that the respondents used in their answers, it is also worth highlighting several answers or parts of answers that included other aspects, such as: "to keep up with the progress of society and technologies", "to be aware of the achievements and to have the motivation to upgrade knowledge in the field", "learning that will bring long-term benefit and contribution to per-

sonality development”, “share knowledge with others”, “improving knowledge in psychology, pedagogy and methodology”, “learning, knowledge and skills that are really needed”, “adapting knowledge and skills to current needs”, “daily work on yourself, mentally and physically”, “improving your knowledge in the profession, communication, manners”, “enjoying the transfer of knowledge”, “improving in all areas, not only the teachers’ competences but also their personality”, “learning that continues even after acquiring formal education”. Three teachers also mentioned internal motivation as an important factor in teacher development.

The analysis of the answers shows that the respondents perceive professional development as necessary and closely related to life-long learning. Nonetheless, what is missing in the majority of respondents’ answers is the perception of professional development as a process that is self-initiated and driven by internal motivation. These aspects include not only the area of content knowledge that a teacher can explore independently but also the areas of methodology, pedagogy and psychology, as well as communication and cooperation, which often require formal teacher training. Since professional development implies a complementary relationship between formal and informal forms of learning and education, teachers must create formal training programmes that teachers consider relevant and meaningful. The results also indicate that teachers most often participate in forms of professional development within the institution, drawing attention to the importance of organising purposeful forms of professional development with peer-training activities.

Conclusion

The issue of teachers’ professional development is not only a segment of lifelong learning that teachers achieve on their own initiative, guided by internal motivation, but it has become an integral part of legal acts binding for all teachers employed in public schools in the Republic of Serbia. In this paper, we investigated teachers’ attitudes towards professional development and how often and in what forms of professional development programmes respondents participate in.

The results show that the respondents, to a high degree, agree with the defined standards of teacher competencies, which emphasise that a teacher should be competent not only in the subject matter he/she teaches but also in the field of methodology, psychology, pedagogy. Despite these results, the correlation between respondents’ attitudes and their participation exists only when participation is externally motivated, that is, when the institution sends them as part of their work

obligations. However, there is no correlation between their attitudes and the frequency of participation when they seek formal forms of training. This result indicates either dissatisfaction with the offer of the accredited programmes, or a lack of internal motivation to self-initiate improvement in a formal context. Both are in agreement with the results obtained from the questionnaire: an explicit question whether they are satisfied with the offer, and another, open-ended question when the respondents explained what they perceived as professional development – what is missing in the respondents' answers are aspects of self-regulation, own initiative and internal motivation. Another significant result relates to the absence of a correlation between years of teaching experience and respondents' attitudes.

This research is based on the responses of a sample of respondents who did not formally prepare for teaching during their studies. A larger and more heterogeneous sample of respondents could contribute to a more comprehensive picture of attitudes and frequency of teacher participation in various professional development programmes. In future research, teachers' needs for professional development could be examined to propose more relevant PD programmes.

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