



JOB SATISFACTION AND PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT IN KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

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Abstract/Izveček

The article investigates the relationship between kindergarten teachers' professional burnout and their education level and work experience. The data were obtained through a survey conducted among 206 kindergarten teachers. According to the results, kindergarten teachers are most satisfied working with children and collaborating with colleagues, and least satisfied with their monthly income, opportunity for formal professional training, working conditions and work organization. Self-assessment of work exhaustion and work alienation showed no statistically significant differences, but a difference was recorded for work engagement. Kindergarten teachers with a bachelor's degree have the highest level of work engagement, as well as those who are at the beginning of their careers.

Ključne besede:
strokovno
usposabljanje, delovna
vloga, delovni pogoji,
vzgojitelji

Zadovoljstvo z delom in poklicno izgorevanje vzgojiteljev

V prispevku preučujemo povezavo med poklicno izgorelostjo vzgojiteljev v vrtcih ter njihovo stopnjo izobrazbe in delovnimi izkušnjami. Podatke smo pridobili z anketnim vprašalnikom, na katerega je odgovorilo 206 vzgojiteljev. Glede na rezultate so vzgojitelji najbolj zadovoljni z delom z otroki in s sodelovanjem s sodelavci. Najmanj so zadovoljni z mesečnim dohodkom, ponudbo strokovnega izobraževanja, delovnimi razmerami in organizacijo dela. Samoocena delovne izčrpanosti in odtujenosti od dela ni pokazala statistično značilnih razlik, je pa razlika zabeležena pri delovni zavzetosti. Najvišjo stopnjo delovne zavzetosti imajo vzgojitelji z univerzitetno izobrazbo ter tisti, ki so na začetku kariere.

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Introduction

This paper aims to determine how kindergarten teachers assess their workload depending on their education level and work experience. Educational policies often emphasize the importance of lifelong education and professional development, which form the basis for the development of quality early childhood education practices. Therefore, kindergarten teachers are expected to continuously acquire new knowledge about the child's development and the preconditions for complete child development, and to improve their efficiency through documentation, research, and reflective thinking (Slunjski, Šagud and Brajša Žganec, 2006; Vekić-Kljaić, 2016). Consequently, kindergarten teachers should demonstrate commitment to professional development and the application of new knowledge in practice, as well as be sensitive to the individual characteristics of children (NAEYC, 2019). However, the extent to which the recommendations will be implemented depends on personal effort and working conditions.

People who are internally motivated when choosing their profession remain in their profession longer and have a more successful career (Gati and Tal, 2008). The most common motives for choosing a teaching job include the satisfaction of helping children in their learning and development (Konen, 2020). Personal motivation, commitment to work, dedication to each child and identification of the child's difficulties and needs, as well as timely problem-solving in cooperation with parents and expert staff are important characteristics and at the same time factors leading to satisfaction with the teaching job (Preschool Education Division, 2010; Plavšić and Diković, 2022). In addition, job satisfaction depends on the workplace atmosphere, according to Olsen and Anderson (2007), who claim that friendly relations, cooperation with colleagues and good administrative support help employees to feel satisfied. Among other factors of satisfaction are fair hiring practices, the possibility of further professional training (Turner et al. 2007; Vidal, 2007), job security, the opportunity to use personal competences, good human resources management, salary in accordance with the performance of job duties, support from superiors, the possibility of work-life balance (Kapur, 2018; Mohanty, 2009), work autonomy (McCormack and Cotter, 2013), an adequate number of children in the educational group (Wells, 2015), fewer children with problematic behaviour (Asi, Aydin and Karabay, 2018; Lee et al., 2017) and kindergartens and educational groups well equipped with educational materials (Matković et al., 2020).

It can be concluded that the education of kindergarten teachers is an important factor (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2000; de Kruif et al., 2000), but not necessarily a determinant of job satisfaction (Czajka, 2020; Early et al., 2007). Moreover, it can be assumed that people who have been working for a longer period will develop the skills to deal more successfully with challenges at work, but also that people with less work experience can enjoy their work more than those with more work experience (Kovač and Javornik Krečić, 2014; Plavšić and Diković, 2022). People with longer work experience may, owing to loss of motivation and fatigue, give up further education and professional development, which can cause workplace stress (McCormack and Cotter, 2013).

When a person is exposed to chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and sees no possibility of solving this problem, this results in burnout syndrome (WHO, 2019). The syndrome is manifested in feelings of fatigue and exhaustion, negative attitudes towards work, cynicism, reduced personal achievements, low job satisfaction, and poor general health (Okeke et al., 2014). Burnout syndrome is most often measured by the level of work engagement, work alienation and work exhaustion (Kovač and Javornik Krečić, 2014; Sinval et al., 2019).

The purpose of this research was to find the connection between the variables, namely the self-assessment of professional burnout and the educational level and work experience of kindergarten teachers.

Aim and subject of research

The professional role of kindergarten teachers in Croatia is burdened with administrative work, a large number of children in classrooms, everyday interactions with different participants in the educational process (children, parents, colleagues, and supervisors), and lower monthly income (Matković et al., 2020). Research shows that these factors are correlated with higher levels of professional burnout, while personal motivation, dedication to educational work with children, and the opportunity for further professional training are correlated with job satisfaction (Turner et al., 2007; Vidal, 2007; Gati and Tal, 2008; Kapur, 2018). That is why educational level, professional development, and work experience (Czajka, 2020; Plavšić and Diković, 2022) are the focus of this study.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to research the difference in self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to kindergarten teachers' educational level and work experience.

Research questions

This paper has the following research questions: How satisfied are kindergarten teachers with certain work-related factors? What is the connection between self-assessment of professional burnout and educational level? And what is the connection between self-assessment of professional burnout and work experience?

Methodology

Instrument

An anonymous survey was conducted using a two-part questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire contained questions about participants' sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, work experience, level of education, workplace, the type of educational program, working hours, public or private kindergarten). The satisfaction of working conditions was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale measuring satisfaction with internal factors (cooperation with colleagues, parents and children, family and work role) and external factors at the workplace (working conditions, monthly income, work organization, opportunities for professional development). The participants reported to what extent they were satisfied with each factor, with the numbers indicating: 1 = I completely disagree; 2 = I mostly disagree; 3 = I neither agree nor strongly disagree; 4 = mostly agree; 5 = completely agree. The second part of the questionnaire contained 16 questions, and was created as a Likert-type scale, where the number 1 indicated complete disagreement and 5 complete agreement with the item. This part of the questionnaire was constructed according to the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) (c.f. Sinval et al., 2019), and the questions were adapted to the kindergarten teaching profession. To determine the accuracy of the translation, a double translation method was used, i.e. from English to Croatian and from Croatian to English.

The construct validity and reliability of the job role satisfaction scale was analysed by factor analysis, the appropriateness of which was supported by the following measures: $KMO=0.771$, $p<0.001$. When using the OLBI instrument, a two-factor structure is most often obtained, yet in this research three fixed factors were

extracted, which explain a total of 46.091% of the variance (the first explains 17.79%, the second 14.23%, and the third 14.06%):

Factor 1: work exhaustion (measured as the extent to which participants self-assess work exhaustion): *After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary; After work, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better; After working, I have enough energy for my leisure activities; After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary; During my work, I often feel emotionally drained; Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well; There are days when I feel tired before I even get to work.*

Factor 2: work alienation (measured as the extent to which participants self-assess work alienation): *It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way; Sometimes I feel sickened by my work tasks; Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work; Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically; I can tolerate the pressure of my work very well.*

Factor 3: work commitment (measured as the extent to which participants self-assess work commitment): *I feel more and more engaged in my work; This is the only type of work that I can imagine myself doing; I find my work to be a positive challenge; When I work, I usually feel energized; I always find new and interesting aspects in my work.*

Participants

The survey was conducted in 2021, and the participants were 206 early childhood and preschool teachers from the city of Split and the surrounding area. The participants were employed in city, religious and private kindergartens. Convenience sampling was applied, and the survey was conducted live to include teachers with longer work experience. The participants were informed about the data anonymity and confidentiality.

Out of 206 participants, the majority were women (98.1%), while only 1.9% of kindergarten teachers were men. The average age of participants was 44.1 years old. If we look at the length of service 10.20% of kindergarten teachers had up to 5 years of service, 34% of kindergarten teachers had 6 to 15 years of service, 26.20% had 16 to 25 years of service and 29.60% of kindergarten teachers had over 25 years of service. Most kindergarten teachers had two-year professional education (141), 43

kindergarten teachers had an undergraduate level of education, 20 had graduate level education, while the remaining 2 had a high school education. The average number of professional development training opportunities among kindergarten teachers was 3 (M: 3.13; \pm SD=3.72), which means that every kindergarten teacher participated in 3 professional development training sessions in the past year. The majority of kindergarten teachers work in city-owned preschool institutions (85%), most work in 10-hour programs (82.5%), and kindergarten programs are the most common type of program (69.42%) among participants in this survey.

Data analysis

A statistical data analysis was performed using the Social Science Statistics Package (SPSS 24). General data on participants are presented in graphs and tables, followed by a descriptive analysis including percentages, frequencies, mean values, and standard deviation. Factor analysis and the Kruskal-Wallis test were used to test the hypotheses. The results are presented in tables and further clarified in the text.

The majority of the 206 research participants were women, with significantly fewer male teachers (N=4). The average age of the participants was 44.1 years. Most teachers had between 6 and 15 years of work experience (34%), while the lowest number of teachers had up to 5 years (10%). Most teachers had a two-year initial professional education (69%); 21% of teachers had an undergraduate level of study, and 10% a graduate level. The average number of professional training opportunities was 3 (M= 3.13; \pm SD=3.72), which means that each teacher participated in 3 professional training sessions in the previous year. The largest number of kindergarten teachers work in a preschool education institution founded by the city (85%), most are included in programs lasting 10 hours (82.5%), and kindergarten programs for children from 3 to 7 years old are the most prevalent type of program (69.42%) in which these kindergarten teachers work.

Hypotheses

H₀: There is no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to kindergarten teachers' education level and work experience.

H₁: There is no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to kindergarten teachers' education level.

H2: There is no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to kindergarten teachers' work experience.

Research results

Descriptive analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, we sought to determine how satisfied kindergarten teachers are with certain work-related factors. Table 1 shows the satisfaction levels. The results in the table are arranged in such a way that the elements with which the kindergarten teachers are most satisfied appear in first place, and those for which they express the lowest level of satisfaction appear in last place.

Table 1. Level of general satisfaction among participants with individual elements.

Elements of satisfaction	M (\pm SD)	Mode
Generally, with my family role.	4.56 (0.58)	5
With children in my group.	4.44 (0.65)	5
Collaborating with colleagues.	4.43 (0.7)	5
Generally, with my job role/work.	4.23 (0.66)	4
Collaborating with parents.	4.21 (0.7)	4
With work organization in the institution where I work.	3.69 (0.85)	4
With working conditions (material, personnel, etc.).	3.65 (0.93)	4
With formal professional training opportunities	3.23 (1.02)	4
With monthly income.	2.86 (1.2)	2

The results showed that kindergarten teachers are most satisfied with their family role (mean=4.56), with the children in the group where they work (mean=4.44) and with cooperation among their work colleagues (mean=4.43), while they are least satisfied with the opportunities for formal professional training (mean= 3.23) and their monthly income (mean=2.86).

Education level and work experience can have an impact on the level of professional burnout. In this study, it was assumed that there was no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to kindergarten teachers' education level.

In order to examine whether there is a difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to education level, the Kruskal-Wallis test was performed (Table 2).

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis test of the average rank of the job role satisfaction factor by education level.

Ranking	Education level	N	Medium Rank
Work exhaustion	Two-year education / College	141	
	Undergraduate level	43	105.29
	Graduate level	20	92.50
	Total	204	103.70
Work alienation	Two-year education / College	141	
	Undergraduate level	43	103.11
	Graduate level	20	100.05
	Total	204	103.35
Work engagement	Two-year education / College	141	
	Undergraduate level	43	95.55
	Graduate level	20	120.29
	Total	204	114.50
	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
REGR Work exhaustion for Education level analysis	1.530	2	.465
REGR Work alienation for Education level analysis	.092	2	.955
REGR Work engagement for Education level analysis	6.607	2	.037

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Education_level_numbers

* $p < 0.05$

The results showed no significant difference for work exhaustion ($p=0.465$) and work alienation ($p=0.955$) with respect to education level; however, a statistically significant difference was found for work engagement ($p=0.037$). The lowest level of engagement was observed in kindergarten teachers who had completed two-year education/college, and the highest in kindergarten teachers with undergraduate education (Table 2).

Furthermore, in testing the effect of work experience, we started from the hypothesis that there was no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of professional burnout with regard to work experience.

Table 3 shows the results from testing the dimensions of job role satisfaction with regard to work experience. Kindergarten teachers with the longest service (over 25 years) show the highest levels of work exhaustion, while work alienation is most

common in kindergarten teachers with 16 to 25 years of service. They also showed the lowest levels of work engagement. However, only the following statistical analyses checked whether there were statistically significant differences.

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis test of the average rank of the job role satisfaction factor by work experience.

Ranking	Work experience	N	Medium rank
Work exhaustion	up to 5 years	21	
	6 – 15 years	70	83.24
	16 – 25 years	54	101.20
	over 25 years	61	100.22
	Total	206	116.02
Work alienation	up to 5 years	21	
	6 – 15 years	70	107.62
	16 – 25 years	54	108.73
	over 25 years	61	109.30
	Total	206	90.95
Work engagement	up to 5 years	21	
	6 – 15 years	70	131.14
	16 – 25 years	54	109.71
	over 25 years	61	93.28
	Total	206	95.90
	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig. p
REGR Work exhaustion for Work experience analysis	5.383	3	.146
REGR Work alienation for Work experience analysis	3.853	3	.278
REGR Work engagement for Work experience analysis	7.855	3	.049

a. Kruskal-Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Work experience

*p<0.05

According to the results, there is no significant difference for work exhaustion ($p=0.146$) and work alienation ($p=0.278$), but there is a statistically significant difference for work engagement ($p=0.049$). Higher levels of engagement were recorded in participants who were at the very beginning of their careers.

Discussion

This research investigated which factors kindergarten teachers are satisfied with at their workplace and whether their burnout is linked to their education level and work experience. According to the results, kindergarten teachers are mostly satisfied with

their job role, they cope well with the amount of work they perform, they are looking for new interests in their field of work, and they are able to withstand job pressure. Kindergarten teachers are most satisfied with the children in their groups and cooperation with colleagues, but least satisfied with the opportunities for formal professional training and with their monthly income. Although they do not think that they experience burnout at work, the self-assessment of burnout factors revealed a statistically significant difference in work engagement with regard to kindergarten teachers' education level and work experience. Those with a higher education level (bachelor's degree) and those with less work experience feel greater work engagement.

Results showing that kindergarten teachers were least satisfied with their monthly income were expected to some extent because kindergarten teachers in Croatia receive a lower monthly salary compared to that in other countries of the European Union. This can indicate a low level of investment in the development of the teaching profession and poor public appreciation (European Commission, 2019; Lee, Myers and Kim, 2009; Matković et al., 2020), which can also be reflected in a decrease in motivation for this job. Increased salary could lead to increased job satisfaction because when employees think they are receiving a salary that is in line with their job duties, their job satisfaction increases (Mohanty, 2009).

In addition to salary, the most common sources of dissatisfaction include relationships with colleagues, superiors, and parents of children they teach, having too many children in the educational group and poor kindergarten equipment (Borzaga and Depedri, 2005; Cross Ogohi, 2018; Wells, 2015). All these factors could be considered as external factors of satisfaction, those that make up the quality of the working atmosphere and working conditions, and when kindergarten teachers do not find these satisfactory, this can result in significantly higher levels of burnout (Van Houtte, 2006).

The possibility of influencing the quality of these factors is also important. If kindergarten teachers feel they can influence the improvement of their working conditions, their satisfaction will be higher (Perrachione, Rosser and Petersen, 2008). In this study, kindergarten teachers showed that they were satisfied with their cooperation with children and colleagues; it is thus possible to assume that dissatisfaction with salary is compensated by the social support they receive in their workplace (Li and Zhang, 2019).

As explained by Koludrović, Jukić and Ercegovac (2009), seeking help within the work collective and active problem solving can help prevent burnout syndrome. A good atmosphere within the work collective and friendly relations with colleagues, help solve problems with more efficiency; therefore, quality teamwork becomes a prerequisite for easier problem solving at work. Positive attitudes toward colleagues and work help in experiencing greater job satisfaction, which is important for motivation and greater personal engagement.

Education level is among the most important predictors of kindergarten teachers' quality of work, but also one of the factors that can help them cope with challenges at work (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2000; de Kruif et al., 2000; Lee, Myers and Kim, 2009). However, results from other research show that there is no direct link between kindergarten teachers' education level and the quality of their practice (Early et al. 2007). In this research, the results showed that a higher education level is associated with greater work engagement. This can be explained by the fact that those motivated for higher education feel an internal motivation to improve their practice, and vice versa: those who strive to improve the quality of their work will seek out more professional development opportunities. In Croatia, most kindergarten teachers have undergraduate education, and only in the past decade (since 2012) has there also been the possibility of obtaining a master's degree. It remains to be seen how education level will reflect on improving working conditions, salary increase and job satisfaction.

However, no matter how many kindergarten teachers choose further education, they should be professionally trained (Gallego and Caingcoy, 2021; Guskey, 2013). This research confirmed that kindergarten teachers with longer work experience (over 25 years) show higher levels of exhaustion than those with fewer years of service, while work alienation is most common among teachers with 16 to 25 years of work experience. Živčić-Bećirević and Smojver-Ažić (2005) confirmed that kindergarten teachers with more work experience feel more stress at work than those kindergarten teachers with less work experience. On the other hand, statistical differences were found only in the assessment of work engagement factors, whereby those kindergarten teachers who are at the beginning of their careers show a higher level of engagement than older colleagues. These results are in line with the research (Leiter, 1999; McCormack and Cotter, 2013) which showed that burnout is most pronounced in kindergarten teachers with 3 to 15 years of work experience, in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

The period between the third and fifth years of service is when young kindergarten teachers are most enthusiastic about their work; they try to apply their university knowledge and leave a good impression. That is also the period when they are most engaged in their work, but because of lack of mechanisms to successfully cope with stress at work, they could very easily decide to leave this profession (Whitebook and Sakai, 2003). Kindergarten teachers' job satisfaction can thus be sustained with the right approach and professional support within the first five years of service.

Conclusion

This study has yielded results that need to be considered if we want to improve working conditions in preschool institutions and kindergarten teachers' practice. A satisfied kindergarten teacher will certainly invest more personal potential in raising the quality of educational practice. Most people in the teaching profession are internally motivated since salary or social status are insufficiently motivating to choose this profession. That is why understanding the importance of a kindergarten teaching job, support in the public space, respect on the part of the local community and parents, and better opportunities for formal professional training can be factors that contribute to kindergarten teachers' satisfaction, which will also affect the quality of their practice.

This study has certain disadvantages as well. Future research should cover a larger number of kindergarten teachers who have a master's degree in education. It could also be explored what kind of professional training and career development would help kindergarten teachers reduce professional burnout.

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