

## DEVELOPING TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY PROGRAMMES

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### Abstract/Izvleček

The main aim of the paper is to explore primary school teachers' attitudes towards the impact of international mobility on their professional and personal development, with a special focus on the ways mobility contributed to the development of their intercultural competences. We present the results of a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with teachers (n=10) who have taken part in Erasmus+ mobility abroad. The results of the study suggest that the experience of mobility proved to be a positive one for all interviewees who reported numerous benefits in terms of professional and personal development of the participants as well as in terms of gaining intercultural competences.

### Keywords:

international mobility,  
intercultural  
competence,  
professional  
development, primary  
school teachers.

### Ključne besede:

slikopis, slikanica,  
multimodalnost,  
strukturalizem, gradniki  
bralne pismenosti.

### UDK/UDC

### Razvijanje medkulturnih kompetenc učiteljev s pomočjo mednarodnih programov mobilnosti

Glavni namen prispevka je raziskati stališča osnovnošolskih učiteljev do vpliva mednarodnih programov mobilnosti na njihov poklicni in osebni razvoj, še posebej na razvoj njihovih medkulturnih kompetenc. Predstavljamo rezultate kvalitativne študije, ki temelji na polstrukturiranih intervjujih z učitelji (n=10), ki so sodelovali v programu Erasmus+. Rezultati študije kažejo, da se je izkušnja mobilnosti za vse udeležence izkazala kot izrazito pozitivna, poročali so o številnih pozitivnih učinkih na poklicni in osebni razvoj udeležencev ter na njihovo pridobivanje medkulturnih kompetenc.

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## **Introduction**

Professional development of teachers plays a pivotal role in ensuring the quality of education and the overall success of students. It is an ongoing, lifelong process that comprises not only the acquisition of new knowledge and the improvements in one's teaching but even more so the development of one's personality, values, and personal beliefs that help individuals define and understand the world around them (Collinson, 2009; Ivajnšič and Ivanuš-Grmek, 2009; Korthagen, 2017). In turn, these beliefs, understandings, and subjective theories, i.e. the teacher's internal world, further shape the teacher's professional development (internal factors), alongside formal education and professional training, the evolving educational landscape, informal influences of important others, etc. (external factors) (Makovec Radovan, 2018).

In the multicultural and multilingual educational landscape of today, the teacher's ability to effectively engage with students from varied cultural backgrounds and to create inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and respected is key. Therefore, there is an urgent need for professional development opportunities that emphasise and develop intercultural competence. Numerous authors (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002; Bennett, 2011; Huber and Reynolds, 2014) stress that real changes in attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and action that build the complex construct of intercultural competence can only be achieved through personal experience. Teachers must become intercultural learners, capable of analysing their own intercultural experiences and incorporating newly acquired knowledge and skills into their teaching (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002). This paper aims to investigate the impact of international mobility programmes on the professional and personal development of primary school teachers, especially their intercultural competences.

## **Intercultural competence of teachers**

Intercultural interactions are an integral part of the majority of educational contexts and teachers play a crucial role in fostering intercultural communication within these contexts. Culturally competent communication enables us to understand and respect people with different cultural affiliations from us, to interact and communicate with these individuals or groups in an appropriate, effective and respectful manner, and to establish positive and constructive relationships with them.

At the same time, it empowers us to understand ourselves and our cultural affiliations through encounters with them (Huber and Reynolds, 2014). For such appropriate interactions in various cultural contexts, one needs a well-developed intercultural competence, which, according to Bennett (2011), is composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioural characteristics and skills. The cognitive aspect of intercultural competence includes awareness and knowledge of one's own and other cultures, general and specific cultural knowledge, and the ability to analyse the influence of one culture on another. The emotional aspect is defined by curiosity, cognitive flexibility, motivation, and open-mindedness, while the behavioural aspect encompasses relationship-building skills, problem-solving, empathy, listening skills, and the ability to consider others' opinions.

Additionally, Huber and Reynolds (2014) emphasise the relationship between intercultural competence and language competence. They explain that language is the most important symbolic system which enables group members to share their cultural perspectives, beliefs and values, therefore, language competence is crucial for understanding cultural perspectives, beliefs and practices to which it is linked. In situations where people with different languages interact, plurilingual competence is especially important. Hence, when developing intercultural competence, we must consider also developing plurilingual competence and communicative awareness as its crucial components.

Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) define intercultural competence as a complex construct of attitudes, knowledge, and skills, supplemented by an individual's values stemming from one's social identity, formed by belonging to various social groups. At the core of intercultural competence are intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*), which manifest as curiosity and openness towards other cultures, encompassing a readiness to relativize one's own values, beliefs, and behaviours. This implies the ability for an individual to view their own culture through the eyes of someone from another culture, with different values, beliefs, and behaviours. Another significant factor is knowledge (*savoirs*), which includes not only knowledge about a particular culture but primarily an understanding of how social groups and identities function in intercultural interaction.

As important as attitudes and knowledge are skills, specifically interpretation and connection skills (*savoir comprendre*) and research and interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*).

These relate to an individual's ability to interpret elements from another culture and link them to elements from their own, as well as the ability to find out new knowledge and link it to the existing one. The fourth key factor is critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*), which refers to an individual's ability to be aware of their own values and how they influence their understanding of others' values. As the authors emphasise, the role of the teacher as an intercultural mediator is multifaceted, involving not only developing knowledge about a particular culture but also fostering skills, attitudes, and awareness of values.

However, to become intercultural mediators, teachers first need to attain intercultural sensitivity and skills themselves. Cushner and Mahon (2009) report on several studies that have been conducted using the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer and Bennett, 2003), an instrument for assessing the level of intercultural sensitivity of teachers, which identifies where an individual falls along a continuum from highly ethnocentric to highly ethnorelative. The results of these studies show an unexpected gap between teachers, education students, and the children they are preparing to teach, demonstrating that young learners exhibit greater intercultural sensitivity compared to their teachers. The studies revealed a link between the number of intercultural contacts and relationships, developed for example while attending an international school, and the level of intercultural sensitivity (Cusher and Mahon, 2009). Also Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) emphasize that teachers are not necessarily the sole or main source of information about another culture as they have not had the opportunity to personally experience the same and as many cultures as their students. Thus, teachers first need to become intercultural learners themselves to be then able to promote all the aspects of intercultural dimension in their teaching.

### **Developing intercultural competences through mobility**

The two components of intercultural competence that are usually in focus in a classroom are knowledge and skills, while the change in attitudes and values tends to happen almost by coincidence (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002). However, to achieve the long-term development of interculturality, it is necessary to combine the affective and the cognitive. This is best done with experiential learning that makes “the strange familiar and the familiar strange” (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002, 19) and challenges the learner's emotions and feelings.

An international exchange or visit can be a holistic learning experience that enables just that. By participating in international mobility programmes, projects and exchanges, one gets the experience of working with people of other professional, cultural and national identities and acquires products and information with an intercultural dimension.

According to the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2010), participation in international professional networks, courses, workshops, and exchanges is part of informal and non-formal intercultural education. With the term informal intercultural education, we label lifelong acquisition of intercultural attitudes through family, peers, neighbours, chance encounters, reading materials, media, etc., while non-formal intercultural education stands for education occurring outside formal education in the form of courses, workshops, exchanges, etc. Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) stress that teachers should see these as significant in their professional development.

Numerous studies (among others Bracht et al., 2006; Čelebič, 2008; Engel, 2010; Ersoy and Günel, 2011; Lazar, 2012; Horta, Jung and Santos, 2020; Biasutti et al., 2021) were conducted to analyse the impact of international mobility programmes, predominantly Erasmus+, on the participants' professional development. However, the majority of them focused on tertiary education and consequently reported the main benefits in the area of research, academic knowledge and networking, and less in the area of teaching and teaching practice. Fewer studies that focus on the mobility of teaching staff in pre-primary, primary and secondary education, mostly show that mobility has a positive impact on the participants' teaching practice and the development of their intercultural competences. A study by Biasutti and her colleagues (2021) analyzed a professional development experience within an international Erasmus + project for primary and secondary teachers, with a focus on intercultural education and showed that by participating in the project, the teachers got the opportunity to work on their pedagogical orientation, examine teaching practices, and develop teaching strategies for intercultural education. Ersoy and Günel (2011) conducted research into pre-service teachers' cross-cultural experiences, and concluded that they had a distinctly positive influence on their professional skills and contributed to their individual development. Findings of the study also indicated that diverse field experiences contributed to the participants'

understanding of the importance of infusing a multicultural approach in their classrooms. The Slovenian National Agency MOVIT has also conducted several studies on the effects of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action program, focusing on the mobility of teaching staff. The results indicate positive effects on gaining new knowledge and skills, which include acquiring teaching methodologies, practical knowledge, and skills for working with target groups, broadening horizons through the establishment of personal and professional networks, and gaining new ideas, inspiration, and motivation for further work. Researchers report that mobility participants have recognized progress in strengthening intercultural dialogue and developing awareness of cultural diversity, and solidarity. Nearly 94% of participants have noticed positive effects on personal development, including better coping with new situations and increased self-awareness. Some did not recognize specific changes, which can be attributed to a longer period of recognition or already well-developed personality traits (Mayr and Bizjak, 2020).

### **Research aims and methodology**

This research aims to determine the impact of international mobility programmes on the professional and personal development of primary school teachers. Specifically, we were interested in how individuals' intercultural competences were developed or reinforced due to their time spent abroad in a multicultural environment, and how teachers' classroom practices changed after participating in the mobility programme.

Therefore, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What is the participants' perception of the influence of international mobility experience on their career development?
2. What is the participants' perception of the influence of international mobility experience on their personal development?
3. In what ways did the participants' international mobility contribute to the development of their intercultural and multilingual competences?
4. In what ways did the participants' pedagogical practice change after the experience of international mobility?
5. What is the participants' perception of the advantages and disadvantages of participating in international mobility programmes?

### *Participants*

The participants of this qualitative research are 10 Slovene primary school teachers who have already participated in international mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. They mostly participated in job shadowing programmes, where they worked at local primary schools with local teachers and colleagues from other European countries. Five participants have less than 10 years of work experience, two participants have been teaching for 10 to 20 years, and three of them are experienced teachers with more than 20 years of work experience.

### *Instruments*

The data were collected with a semi-structured interview, which contained 12 open-ended questions on the participants' international mobility experience(s) and the way it influenced different aspects of their lives. Interviews were conducted in May and June 2023 in face-to-face meetings or on ZOOM. They were audio-recorded and later, for the purpose of the analysis, transcripts were made.

Another tool for data collection was "the river of career development" (Javornik Krečič, 2007; Krmac, 2021), which participants created prior to the interview. The river of career development is typically used as a component of a professional autobiography or autoethnography. It is a reflective tool that enables the participants to delve into the past and explore themselves, their professional path, and thereby their culture (Krmac, 2021). The participants were given the guidelines for the creation of the river of career development and were instructed to bring the completed version to the interview. By using this tool, we tried to determine how highly they value the importance of international mobility in their career paths.

### *Data analysis*

The data obtained from the interviews were analysed according to the principles of qualitative data analysis. In data processing, coding units were determined and relevant concepts defined, from which we derived categories that correspond to the areas of participants' professional and personal development after international mobility, their intercultural and multilingual competences, changes in the participants' pedagogical practice, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of participation in international mobility programmes. The results are presented in the form of code charts. We also conducted a descriptive analysis of documents, namely the participants' rivers of career development.

## Results and discussion

### *The influence of international mobility on professional development*

The first aim of the research was to determine the participants' perception of the importance of international mobility experience for their professional development. Before the interview, the participants were asked to draw the river of their career development (we can see an example in Figure 1). They were not instructed on what to include, therefore, also international mobility was not mentioned in the instructions. The aim of this activity was to determine whether the participants would identify international mobility as one of the elements that shaped their career path and whether they would see it as a positive or a negative influence for their career development.

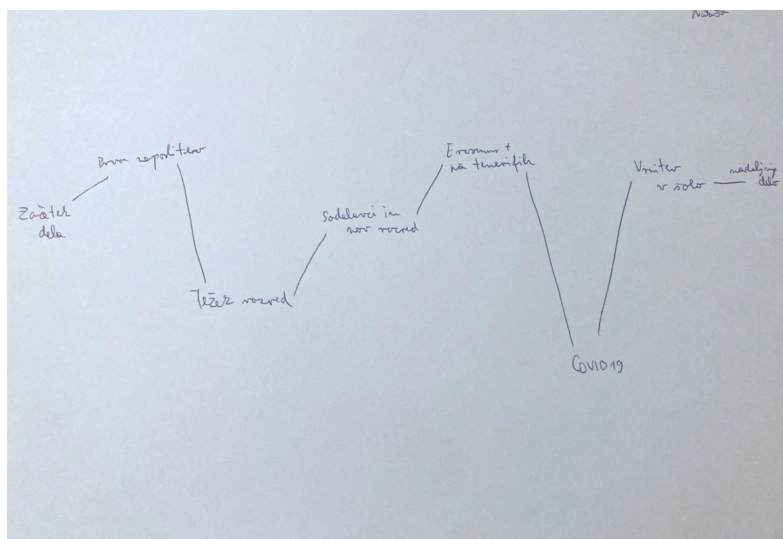


Figure 1: An example of the river of career development

In the representation of the river of career development, we can notice certain pivotal points, appearing across multiple participants. The first two points, which most perceive as the beginning of their career path, are the end of their studies and their first employment. Vertically, these points are positioned somewhere in the middle, indicating that participants perceive this period as fairly neutral. Further, more than half of the participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a



significant turning point, in all cases as a more or less negative one. It can be concluded that the period of the pandemic substantially changed their work and caused them considerable stress. Seven out of ten participants included international mobility in their river of career development. All of them marked it as a distinctly positive influence, either as a high peak or with a plus symbol, indicating that, in their opinion, international mobility significantly and positively shaped their professional path. All participants drew the end of their river of career development with an upward curve, indicating satisfaction with the current state and an optimistic outlook for the future. The end of the river curve is located higher than its beginning, which can be understood as a sense of progress in their career.

The participants were also asked about their perception of the effects international mobility had on their professional development. As we can see from Figure 2, the interviewed teachers unanimously reported that they had experienced professional growth as a result of their participation in international mobility programmes. They most frequently mentioned the importance of sharing examples of good practice with their foreign colleagues and getting valuable insights into several aspects of classroom management and work organization, as well as different teaching methods, approaches, and strategies they had not used before. International mobility came as a positive interruption to their work routine, which brought new ideas for a more dynamic pedagogical process and new motivation for their work.

Another result the majority of them emphasized was gaining a broader perspective and a wider view of their work as teachers and their role as colleagues. They also mentioned that the mobility helped them develop intercultural competences, like cultural knowledge of different educational systems, which helped them recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the Slovenian system of education. Participating in a foreign professional environment represented a shift from their comfort zone, which, however, did not frustrate them but gave them motivation for further improvements and professional progress. In the words of one participant: *“Sure, international mobility is a leap out of your comfort zone, but it is when you overcome that that you can feel confident, proud and strong.”* Some stated gaining confidence in their professional abilities by comparing their pedagogical practices with those of their colleagues from other European countries. As a result, they reported feeling more self-reliant and ready to share their knowledge with colleagues at home, as well. Finally, they emphasized that participation in international mobility programmes allows for faster promotion in teacher job titles and salary grades. When asked if they would recommend international mobility to their colleagues, the majority responded that it should become mandatory for all school staff, as it brings numerous positive effects on both professional and personal

level. One of the teachers stated: *‘Personally, I would make education abroad an integral part of our profession so that everyone should go. Because that way you also see what role you play in the world as an educator.’*

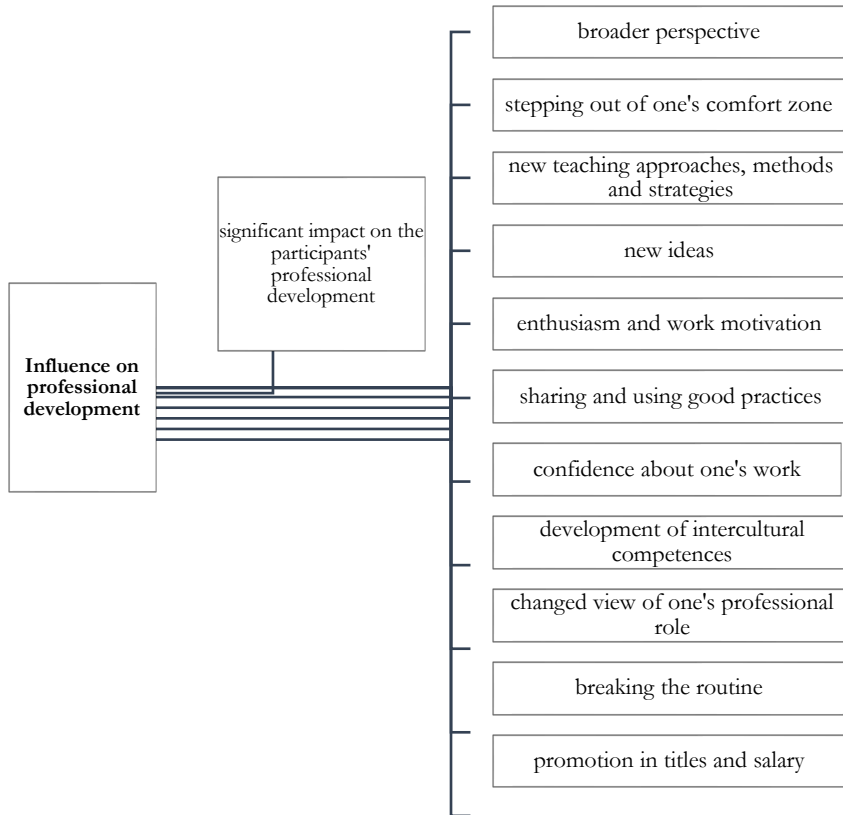


Figure 2: Influence of international mobility on professional development

The results are in line with the findings of Biasutti and her colleagues (2021), as well as those of Ersoy and Günel (2011), showing that international mobility experience can have a significant impact on participants' professional development, especially by improving their work motivation, intercultural competences and the perception of their professional role. International mobility exceeds typical professional training available for teachers at home since it requires a longer commitment during which the teachers are exposed to stressful experiences and challenges that come with travelling and staying abroad. Therefore, the impact of such educational experience

is more powerful, stimulating both internal and external factors of the teacher's professional development (Makovec Radovan, 2018).

*The influence of international mobility on personal development*

Staying in a new, unfamiliar, culturally diverse environment brings various challenges. According to the participants these have had a positive impact on their personal development (Figure 3). Many of them stated it has bolstered their confidence, giving them courage and motivation for future travels. They mentioned that upon returning from an Erasmus+ project, they felt more relaxed in foreign environments and had a greater desire to explore unfamiliar parts of the world. The exchange reportedly enabled them to deal with and overcome their prejudices, and become more tolerant. Additionally, the participants reported developing organizational and problem-solving skills. In the identified benefits we can recognise numerous affective and behavioural characteristics of intercultural competence, like curiosity, open-mindedness and problem-solving (Bennett, 2011).

Another benefit they mentioned was that due to international mobility, they forged new acquaintances and friendships with colleagues across Europe. This shows that international mobility can be quite effective also as an activity within informal intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2010).

*The influence of international mobility on the development of intercultural and multilingual competences*

All participants agree that well-developed intercultural competences are highly important for every primary school teacher, as they typically work with culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classes. This requires teachers who are open, tolerant, understanding, and inclusive mentors for all their students. One teacher particularly emphasized the equal treatment of the Roma pupils, who should receive the same attention and opportunities as other students.

The development of higher intercultural competences is influenced by factors such as a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, actively acquiring knowledge about other cultures, developing skills for communication and collaboration in intercultural situations, and reflecting on one's behaviour in intercultural situations (Bešter and Medvešek, 2016). Since international mobility provides teachers with experiences precisely in the aforementioned situations, we were interested in the participants' perception of their own development of intercultural competences.

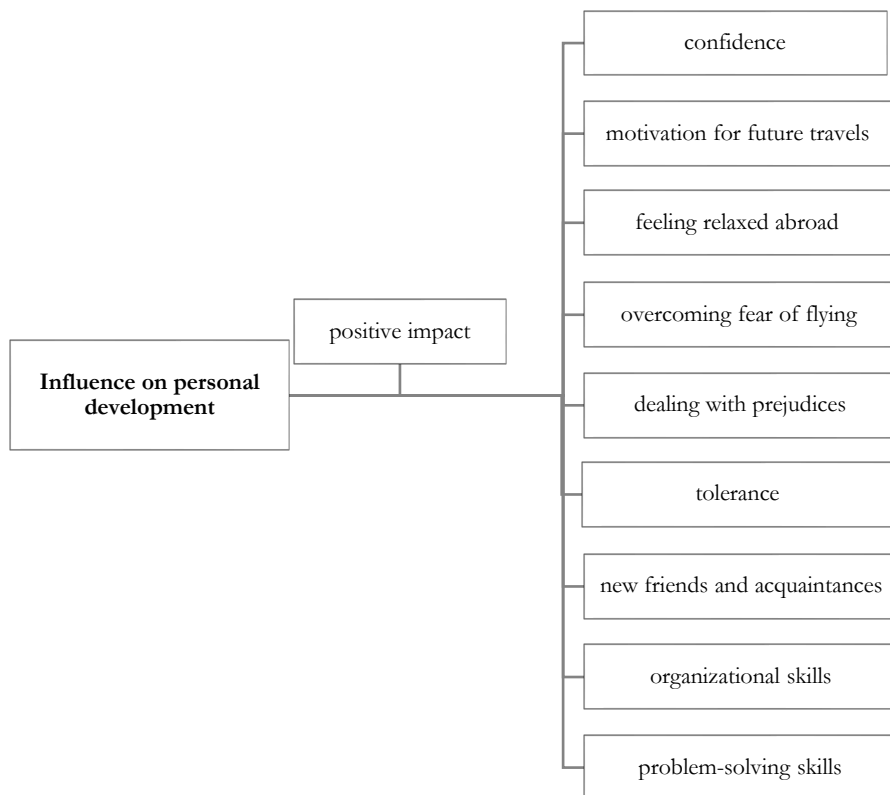


Figure 3: Influence of international mobility on personal development

Five participants stated that the experience of international mobility undoubtedly contributed to the development of their intercultural competences. In the international environment, they experienced a sense of foreignness, which better equipped them to understand and empathize with migrant students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They also believe that teachers should promote intercultural tolerance and acceptance through their own example. One of the participants stated: *"I think [multiculturalism] is one of the key values, which the teachers nowadays need to pass on to their pupils, and to do that they need to live multiculturalism themselves."* This shows that the participating teachers understand the importance and

value of experiential learning in the development of their own intercultural competences, not only their pupils'. One teacher added that the experience opened up new perspectives on her own work environment and made her more open-minded, tolerant, and receptive to different viewpoints.

The other five teachers did not notice significant development in their intercultural competences, as they believed they were already fairly well developed. They believe that individuals who are already open-minded and aware of intercultural issues, such as themselves, primarily opt for international exchanges. This observation may be attributed to a longer period of recognizing changes or to well-developed personality traits in this area before mobility (Mayr and Bizjak, 2020). However, it must be added that all participants reported gaining knowledge not only about the other culture but also their own, which corresponds to the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence. This might indicate that the teachers who reported no significant development in this area, understand intercultural competence as a set of mainly affective characteristics, rather than a construct where cognitive, affective, and behavioural characteristics and skills intertwine (Bennett, 2011).

Several participants identified fear of using a foreign language as a reason why so many of their colleagues never considered international mobility. In their opinion, it is predominantly older teachers who need additional encouragement while younger ones are less intimidated by communication in a foreign language.

These observations mirror the findings of Čelebič (2008), namely that as the level of foreign language proficiency decreases, the likelihood of participation in student exchanges also decreases, with the lowest participation observed among individuals with the poorest foreign language skills.

Five teachers reported experiencing some initial anxiety related to the use of foreign languages, however, in the course of mobility their self-efficacy beliefs changed and they returned home feeling much more confident about their multilingual competence. Two of them explained that they attended an intense language course to brush up on their English prior to the mobility which helped them overcome their fear of using a foreign language. The newly acquired confidence transferred to other foreign languages, as one of them reported trying to communicate in Spanish with the locals who did not speak English: *"I didn't feel uncomfortable or stressed out because I didn't speak Spanish; using a foreign language presented a challenge and I enjoyed acquiring new knowledge."*

The participants identified English as the lingua franca of international mobility programmes. Despite this, several teachers reported alternating between more

languages as they communicated with their hosts, colleagues from home as well as from other European countries, often in the same context. Four teachers who spent their mobility in Spain relied heavily on their knowledge of Italian, while one teacher took advantage of her mobility in Valencia to further improve her knowledge of Spanish. Two teachers reported using the Croatian language as their international group included also colleagues from neighbouring Croatia. It is safe to say that the responses confirm the interrelatedness of plurilingual competence, communication awareness and intercultural competence and the need to consider the development of plurilingual competence when aiming for the development of intercultural competence as well (Huber and Reynolds, 2014).

*The influence of international mobility on pedagogical practice*

The majority of respondents asserted that their pedagogical work changed after their training abroad, which, in their opinion, brought numerous positive changes to their classrooms. They all agree that mobility enhanced their enthusiasm for work and brought plenty of fresh ideas. They highlighted different approaches and methods, particularly in the teaching of mathematics, knowledge assessment and classroom management, as well as numerous activities to enhance motivation and collaborative learning, such as collaborative games, brain break activities, open classrooms, positive psychology, fit activities, etc.

One teacher mentioned the use of ICT and various digital apps in teaching, while some participants mentioned the structured integration of movement into all school lessons. Only one of the teachers reported not noticing significant changes in her work, as she had already been teaching in a dynamic way, incorporating cultural elements into her teaching, etc. However, she managed to improve her classroom management skills.

As Čelebič (2008) states, the greatest beneficiaries of staff mobility are the students, who perceive changes in their daily routines. When we asked the teachers how the pupils reacted to the novelties introduced, they all stated that the pupils found the activities interesting and different, they were motivated for learning and generally in a better mood, which positively affected the classroom atmosphere. However, most participants emphasized that while they could directly transfer some of these activities into their classrooms, quite a few required modifications or adaptations to the Slovenian context. Some participants also reported sharing the acquired novelties, ideas, and experiences in the form of presentations with their colleagues, thus benefiting the entire school. The benefit extends to the national and global levels, as Lazar (2012) emphasizes that the mobility of educational staff at the global

level contributes to the improvement of international involvement of educational institutions.

*The advantages and disadvantages of participating in international mobility programmes*

We asked the participants also about the advantages and disadvantages of international mobility programmes (Figure 4). They all agreed that there were many more advantages and positive effects than disadvantages, with approximately half stating that they did not notice any drawbacks at all. Among the advantages, the most frequently mentioned were opportunities for professional development, increased work motivation, the exchange of good practices among educators in Europe, forming new friendships and acquaintances, and broadening horizons. The most positive outcome of mobility for most of the respondents was the confidence and sense of self-assurance they gained on professional and personal level. As one respondent explained: *“Primarily, I would emphasize the professional breadth you gain when you learn about good practices abroad and become aware of the good or even better work at home.”* Some highlighted also the opportunity for developing intercultural competences and improving foreign language skills. Teachers who renewed their English language skills after many years felt grateful for this opportunity.

One teacher highlighted the advantage of obtaining European funds through the programme, as professional trainings can otherwise be quite costly. On the other hand, another teacher asserted that the amount of funds obtained is too low and does not cover all living expenses, which she sees as a problem.

The main disadvantage mentioned was the bureaucracy and administrative work required by the international mobility projects. The participants complained about the complex administrative procedures related to applications and reporting, as well as the large amount of paperwork they had to fill out before and after going abroad. In addition to the project application, teachers have to plan substitutes for the period when they will be absent, which one teacher pointed out as a significant burden.

Organizing travel and accommodation abroad also posed challenges for teachers before departure, as the participants in mobility are responsible for renting and booking accommodation, purchasing plane tickets, organizing tourist activities, etc. The participants stated that travelling in pairs made the experience easier for them and added that more of their colleagues would opt for international mobility if they had the opportunity to travel in pairs or small groups.

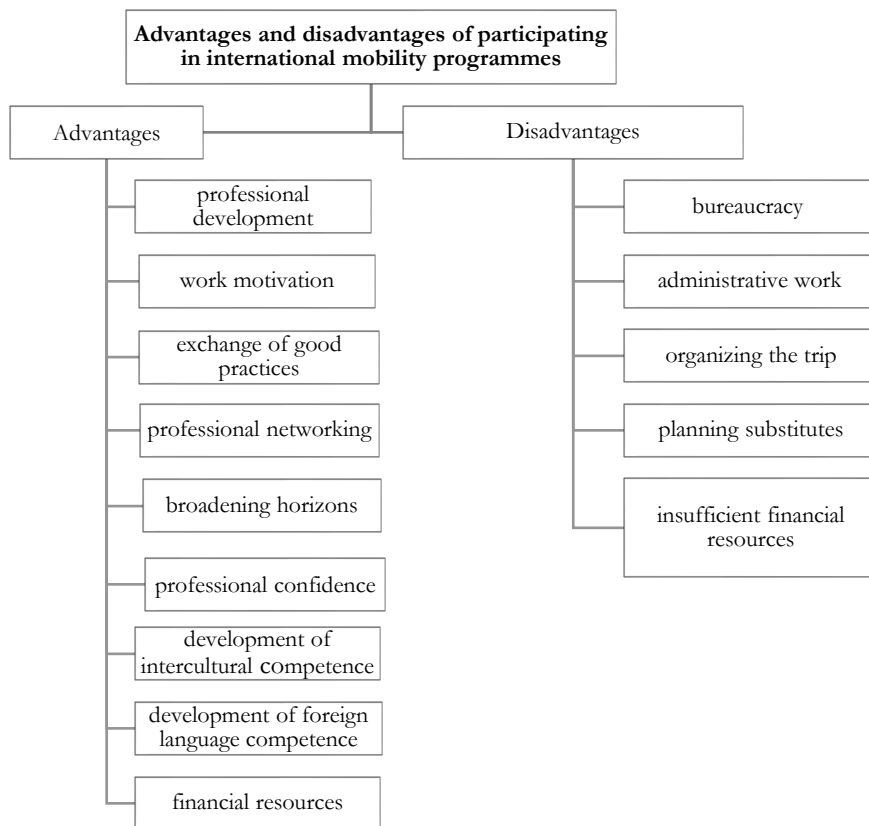


Figure 4: Advantages and disadvantages of participating in international mobility programmes

## Conclusion

Intercultural competence encompasses a blend of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs, the formation of which is a complex and continuing process that is shaped in formal as well as informal educational contexts. The purpose of this paper was to ascertain to what extent and in what ways international mobility of teachers influences the development of their intercultural competence and their overall professional and personal development.

The data analysed show that the participants recognized international exchanges as rich educational contexts that offer valuable learning opportunities as well as opportunities for their professional and personal growth, with intercultural competence as one of its key components. What is more, the majority of them see



international mobility as a highlight in their professional life. As Baloh and Bratož (2019) emphasize, the present-day curricula are commonly productivity and goal-oriented, which leaves very little room for the informal and non-formal acquisition of intercultural competence. This is why it is crucial to recognize the potential of intercultural mobility programmes for the development of intercultural competences of teachers, as well as their professional and personal growth in general.

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