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## Primary School Teachers' Personal and Professional Beliefs on Diversity

ŽELJKA KNEŽEVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

∞ The paper presents research conducted among Croatian primary school classroom teachers and subject teachers regarding their personal and professional beliefs about diversity. The notion of diversity in the context of education was presented as individual differences between students based on race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, abilities, sexual orientation and social class. The results indicate that teachers show different levels of openness towards certain aspects of diversity in the domains of both personal and professional beliefs, but that their personal beliefs are statistically more positive than their professional beliefs. Differences in teachers' beliefs with respect to years of work experience, previous education and professional position were also examined. Statistically significant differences were established only regarding professional position and only in the segment of professional beliefs. The results indicate that there is a need for further research in this area, that is, research that primarily investigates the factors that influence teachers' professional beliefs.

**Keywords:** diversity, inclusive education, multicultural education, primary school, teachers' beliefs

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## Osebna in poklicna prepričanja osnovnošolskih učiteljev glede raznolikosti

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≈ V prispevku je predstavljena raziskava, opravljena med hrvaškimi osnovnošolskimi učitelji razrednega in predmetnega pouka, o njihovih osebnih in poklicnih prepričanjih glede raznolikosti. Pojem raznolikosti v kontekstu izobraževanja je bil predstavljen kot individualne razlike med učenci na podlagi rase, etnične pripadnosti, verskih prepričanj, spola, zmožnosti, spolne usmerjenosti in družbenega razreda. Izsledki kažejo, da učitelji na področju osebnih in poklicnih prepričanj kažejo različne stopnje odprtosti do nekaterih vidikov raznolikosti, vendar so njihova osebna prepričanja – statistično gledano – bolj pozitivna kot poklicna prepričanja. Preučene so bile tudi razlike v prepričanjih učiteljev glede na leta delovnih izkušenj, predhodno izobrazbo in poklicni položaj. Statistično značilne razlike so bile ugotovljene le glede poklicnega položaja in le v segmentu poklicnih prepričanj. Rezultati kažejo, da so na tem področju potrebne nadaljnje raziskave, z drugimi besedami raziskave, ki bi preučevale predvsem dejavnike, ki vplivajo na poklicna prepričanja učiteljev.

**Ključne besede:** raznolikost, inkluzivno izobraževanje, multikulturno izobraževanje, osnovna šola, prepričanja učiteljev

## Introduction

Processes such as globalisation, migration and increased individual mobility make nations around the world culturally more diverse. In this respect, numerous countries have been recording larger shares of immigrants. The result of this global trend is increased diversity in society, which is directly reflected in education and creates, above all, a challenge for teachers to successfully respond to the needs of their students.

Diversity is a very complex and layered notion. In the scientific literature, it is viewed from various perspectives and defined in various ways (Puttick et. al., 2021). Regardless of the various perspectives, diversity, at its core, implies the understanding that individuals can differ from others they live with based on their characteristics (e.g., Arnesen et al., 2010; Mazziotta et al., 2016). In the field of education, diversity is defined as a wide range of differences in students' characteristics and needs (OECD, 2019), which can "affect the specific ways in which developmental potential and learning are realised" (Burns & Shadoian-Gersing, 2010, p. 21). In addition to students' interests and learning styles, these differences include abilities, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and immigrant and/or minority background, with the latter encompassing ethnic and cultural heritage, religion and language (OECD, 2019). All of these variables of diversity are considered dynamic and intertwined, so a comprehensive insight into the educational needs of students can only be achieved if they are researched as a whole and not separately (Banks, 2012).

Such a broad notion of diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for the stakeholders involved in education (Banks, 2014). If not addressed adequately, pluralism in schools can lead to marginalisation and exclusion of students or groups of students. This was often the case in the past, when, under the influence of social circumstances, racial, ethnic, language, religious, gender and sexual minority groups, as well as people with disabilities, were discriminated against or experienced inequality in educational contexts (Banks, 2012). In order to prevent discrimination and to make use of the added value diversity has for education systems and societies, scholars (e.g., Ameny-Dixon, 2004; Gay & Howard, 2000) advocate multicultural education. Multicultural education promotes equality and cultural pluralism, as it is founded on the assumption that "all students – regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, social class, and ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics – should have an equal opportunity to learn in school" (Banks, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, contrary to conceptions of diversity as a disadvantage that can be solved through assimilation of members of minority groups, as occurred in the past (Cochran-Smith, 2003),

multicultural education perceives diversity as a value that enriches society by offering all citizens the possibility to experience other cultures, thus contributing to the development and growth of each individual's own personality (Banks, 2014; OECD, 2019). The notion that multicultural education is necessary only in settings with a large number of people of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures is therefore wrong. The aim of multicultural education is to prepare all students for life in a multicultural world marked by diversity by providing them with the "skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to function within their community cultures, the mainstream culture and within and across other ethnic cultures" (Banks, 2014, p. 4).

The value of diversity, with its broad spectrum of components, is also recognised in inclusive education policies whose focus is not solely the integration of children with physical challenges into regular education, but an appropriate reaction to the educational needs of all students regardless of their differences (Booth, 1996; Bouillet, 2019; Žero & Pižorn, 2022). The aim of the inclusive approach is the transformation of education systems so that they can appropriately respond to the diversity of learners (UNESCO, 2003), meaning that "schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6).

Respect of diversity in the broader sense, and the promotion of the described multicultural and inclusive educational practices, is advocated through education policies by an increasing number of European countries (European Commission, 2017). However, attainment of these educational aims depends primarily on the teachers' readiness for their implementation. Here we refer to the readiness of all teachers regardless of the subject they are teaching, as each student is different and each subject taught has an obligation to respect diversity and offer all students equal learning opportunities (Gay, 2002; Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2019; OECD, 2010).

According to international documents on education policies (Arnesen et al., 2010; European Commission, 2017; OECD, 2019), the competences teachers should possess in order to adequately address diversity in their teaching are, *inter alia*, knowledge of diversity and respect for other cultures, skills for offering appropriate answers to diversified teaching, the ability to create inclusive and safe learning environments, and the ability to establish appropriate communication and relationships with students, parents and colleagues of diverse

social and cultural characteristics.

The foundation for the development of these competences are teachers' values, attitudes and beliefs (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; European Commission, 2017), which, along with knowledge and skills, make up one of the indispensable competency components dealing with diversity in teaching. Beliefs represent a particular filter to knowledge and directly affect the teacher's actions (Bandura, 1982, in Pohan & Aguilar, 2001; see also Sakarneh, 2023; Žero & Pižorn, 2022). This is confirmed by research in the area of diversity showing that teachers' beliefs about students based on some of their characteristics – whether the beliefs concern ethnicity, gender, religion or any other difference – have an effect on the ways in which teachers treat the students, as well as on the expectations teachers have of them (Cardona, 2005; Coronel & Gomez-Hurtado, 2015; Gay, 2010). The task of initial teacher education is therefore to encourage teachers to critically examine their beliefs on diversity, develop positive attitudes towards all students, and develop beliefs that all students are capable of learning (OECD, 2019; Skepple, 2015).

Due to the importance of future teachers' attitudes and beliefs and the role of initial teacher education in their formation, a great deal of research on diversity has focused on examining pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding diversity or their sense of readiness for working in multicultural classrooms (Altinsoy et al., 2018; Giambo & Szecsi, 2007; Puttick et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2016). In order to better understand teacher behaviour related to diversity, however, it is also necessary to include working teachers in research. Teachers' beliefs can be shaped by their practices (Liu et al., 2021), which develop and change under the influence of experience in teaching and the school environment (Agirdag et al., 2016; Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018). Furthermore, teachers' perspectives on diversity should be examined two-dimensionally, from the personal and professional perspective. Research in the domain of teachers' professional identity shows that the development of teachers' identity is influenced by both their personal and professional beliefs and values (Vermunt, 2016; Vizek Vidović & Domović, 2019), which is why Pohan and Aguilar (2001) argue that teachers' professional and personal beliefs about the same diversity phenomenon need not always complement each other. This argument is confirmed by research on the personal and professional beliefs of teachers on diversity conducted by Cardona (2005) in the Alicante province in Spain, which showed that the participants had more positive professional than personal beliefs. However, after ten years of research in the same province, Chiner et al. (2015) obtained the opposite results. Both studies nonetheless confirmed

that teachers' beliefs are influenced by their teaching experience. The results revealed that teachers with little or no work experience were more open to diversity from the professional point of view.

Research of teachers' beliefs or attitudes on diversity conducted in the Republic of Croatia has mostly focused on individual components of diversity, such as students' gender (cf. Baranović et al., 2008), abilities (cf. Skočić Mihić et al., 2016), ethnicity (cf. Nuhanović, 2021) and cultural and linguistic diversity (cf. Cvikić & Novak Milić, 2015). Alternatively, it has examined the degree of respect of several aspects of diversity only among one group of teachers (Filipović, 2015). However, more comprehensive research on issues of diversity in the context of education has not been undertaken to date. Moreover, until now, teachers' attitudes and beliefs have not been examined from a two-dimensional – personal and professional – perspective.

In order to gain a broader picture regarding teachers' perspectives on diversity, the aim of the present paper was to establish the personal and professional beliefs of primary school classroom teachers and subject teachers working in the Republic of Croatia about diversity. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the personal and professional beliefs of teachers about diversity?
2. What is the degree of teachers' personal and professional sensitivity towards particular aspects of diversity?
3. Are there differences in the personal and professional beliefs of teachers with respect to the presence of content related to issues of diversity in their initial education and with respect to their years of work experience and their professional position (classroom teacher/subject teacher)?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample of participants included 264 primary school classroom teachers and subject teachers. As can be seen in Table 1, most of the participants in the research were women, with subject teachers dominating the sample. Most of the participants were between 31 and 40 years of age and had 7–18 years of work experience. Almost half of the participants indicated the City of Zagreb as their place of work, while the proportion of those working in other counties is significantly smaller.

**Table 1***Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in %*

Socio-demographic characteristic	Category	%
Gender	woman	90.5
	man	8
	non-binary person	0.8
	transgender person	0.4
	did not state	0.4
Position	classroom teacher	35.6
	subject teacher	64.4
Age	20–30	17.4
	31–40	30.3
	41–50	28
	51–60	18.9
	60+	5.3
Work experience	1–3	14
	4–6	14.8
	7–18	33
	19–30	24.2
	31–40	12.5
	40+	1.5
Place of work	City of Zagreb	40.4
	Krapina – Zagorje County	8.5
	Zagreb County	7.7
	Primorje – Gorski Kotar County	5.4
	Osijek – Baranja County	5
	Other counties	less than 4%

***Instruments***

Data collection was undertaken using a questionnaire including a section with questions regarding the socio-demographic data of the participants and the number of courses in their initial education that dealt with diversity issues. To examine the participants' personal and professional beliefs about diversity, adapted scales developed by Pohan and Aguilar (2001) were used. Since the scales developed by Pohan and Aguilar (2001) proved to be reliable and valid, the number and the nature of statements in each scale was not been changed in the present research. The scale examining personal beliefs comprised a total of

15 statements referring to various aspects of race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, abilities, and linguistic and cultural differences. The scale for investigating professional beliefs encompassed 25 statements related to the same components of diversity as the scale for examining personal beliefs, but with added statements referring to issues of religion. The number of statements related to particular aspects of diversity varied in both scales, from three statements referring to gender issues in the personal beliefs scale to one statement referring to matters on sexual orientation in the professional beliefs scale. The level of agreement with a particular statement was expressed on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I entirely agree). For both scales investigating teachers' beliefs on diversity, a satisfactory reliability of internal consistency was established. The Cronbach alpha for the scale teachers' personal beliefs on diversity was .699, while for the scale professional beliefs it was .704.

As indicated by Pohan and Aguilar (2001), in both scales lower values indicate a smaller level of acceptance of diversity, while higher values indicate a higher acceptance. Mid-range scores denote openness towards some aspects of diversity, and possible insecurity or uncertainty towards other components. Such scores can also point to a high level of acceptance of particular aspects and low tolerance of some other aspects. Chiner et al. (2015), who also used the scale developed by Pohan and Aguilar (2001), take the value 3.5 as the mean value according to which they determine lower and higher values of participants' sensitivity. This approach has been applied in the research presented in this paper as well.

### *Data analysis*

The collected data were analysed using the statistical program SPSS (version 2.0). Descriptive parameters were calculated for all of the variables. The reliability of internal consistency was determined by calculating the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scales that measured the personal and professional beliefs of the participants. The correlation between the scales was calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficient (significance level 0.01). The t-test (significance level 0.05) was applied to establish differences in personal and professional beliefs, while the analysis of variance and the Kruskal-Wallis test (significance level 0.05) were applied to establish differences with respect to the independent variables.

### *Research design*

Since online surveys represent a method by which potential respondents can be more easily approached (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006), the research



presented in this paper was conducted online in order to reach primary school teachers from all parts of Croatia. The questionnaire was distributed to various closed professional teacher association groups on social networks and was available for participants to fill in throughout the month of June 2022. The respondents were sent an invitation letter with a hyperlink to the web-based survey. The letter clearly stated that only teachers working in primary schools were invited to participate in the survey. In order to ensure privacy and informed consent (Buchanan & Hvizdak, 2009), the introduction to the survey informed participants about the aim of the research and the fact that participation in the research is completely voluntary and anonymous. It was also stated that the participants could withdraw from the research at any time. No personal data or email addresses of the participants were collected.

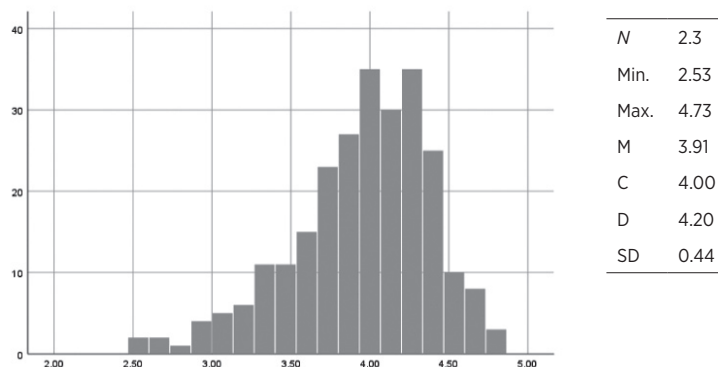
## Results

### *Teachers' personal and professional beliefs about diversity*

Histogram 1 shows the distribution of the participants with respect to their personal beliefs about diversity. It is evident that most of the participants (41.9%) obtained results in the range from  $M = 4.07$  to  $M = 4.73$ , which indicates a higher level of sensitivity towards diversity. Of the participants in the sample, 36.4% are found mid-scale, (from  $M = 3.60$  to  $M = 4.00$ ), while lower personal sensitivity towards diversity (from  $M = 2.53$  to  $M = 3.53$ ) is indicated by 18.4% of participants in the sample.

### Histogram 1

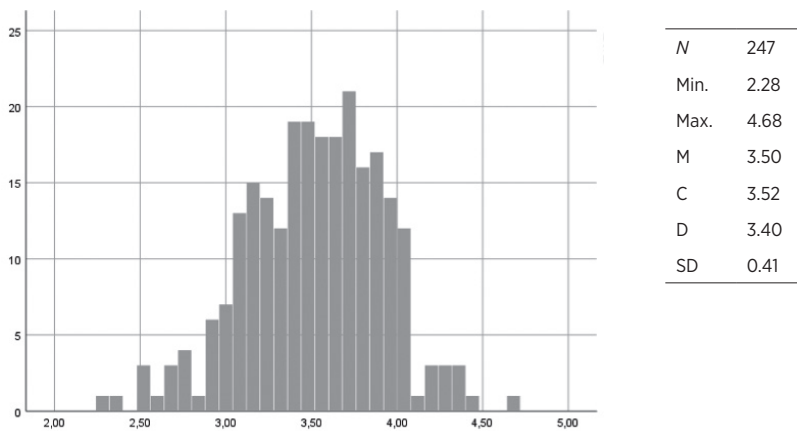
*Distribution of the participants with respect to their personal beliefs on diversity*



An entirely different situation is observed with respect to the professional beliefs of the participants in the sample. As presented in Histogram 2, the distribution according to the participants' professional beliefs indicates that almost half of the participants (52.22%) tend to have a lower sensitivity towards diversity (from  $M = 2.28$  to  $M = 3.52$ ), 41.30% are mid-scale (from  $M = 3.56$  to  $M = 4.00$ ), while only 6.48% show a higher degree of openness towards diversity (from  $M = 4.04$  to  $M = 4.68$ ).

### Histogram 2

*Distribution of the participants with respect to their professional beliefs on diversity*



The observed differences between the personal and professional beliefs of the participants are also statistically significant ( $t = 16.407, p = .00$ ).

### *Degree of sensitivity towards various aspects of diversity*

Modelled on Chiner et al. (2015), for a more transparent presentation of the teachers' personal and professional beliefs, items from both scales were grouped according to the components of diversity that were examined. In this way, the categories obtained for the scale of both the teachers' personal and professional beliefs were: *linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity, social status, abilities, gender and sexual orientation*. For the professional beliefs scale, the category *religion* was also determined, considering that it examined the professional beliefs of teachers according to that aspect of diversity. To determine the aspects of diversity for which the teachers' personal and professional beliefs are statistically significantly higher or lower from the mean value of 3.5, the one-sample  $t$ -test was applied. The degrees of personal sensitivity of teachers

towards particular aspects of diversity are shown in Table 2, while levels of professional sensitivity are shown in Table 3.

**Table 2**

*Results of the one-sample t-test – levels of the teachers' personal sensitivity towards particular aspects of diversity*

Aspects of diversity	Beliefs	N	M	t	df	p
Linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity	personal	260	3.54	1.523	259	.129
Social status	personal	264	3.49	-.150	263	.881
Abilities	personal	262	4.32	16.702	261	.000
Gender	personal	262	4.28	19.474	261	.000
Sexual orientation	personal	261	4.12	13.223	260	.000

N – number of participants, M – arithmetic mean, t – t-test value, df – degrees of freedom, p – statistical significance

The values of the arithmetic means in Table 2 show that in the domain of personal beliefs, teachers have a statistically significantly high level of sensitivity towards differences between individuals based on abilities, gender and sexual orientation. In this regard, the participants entirely disagree with the statement *enabling access to all public institutions for people with physical disabilities is financially very costly* ( $M = 1.3$ ), and they do not agree with the statement that *people with physical disabilities are less efficient at work than people without physical disabilities* ( $M = 2.0$ ). As for gender sensitivity, the participants do not think that *men are better leaders than women* ( $M = 1.6$ ). In the area of sexual orientation, they disagree with the statement that *it is not right that same-sex couples raise children* ( $M = 2.1$ ), and they are of the opinion that *people should develop friendships with persons of different sexual orientations* ( $M = 4.2$ ). When referring to linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity and social status, from the personal perspective teachers take a neutral or undecided position. In the area of linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity, teachers express complete agreement with the statement *members of national minorities in Croatia should have equal opportunities for education and employment as the majority population* ( $M = 4.9$ ); however, they are uncertain regarding the statement that *it is more important for migrants in Croatia to learn the Croatian language than to nurture their mother tongue* ( $M = 2.9$ ). Such contradictory viewpoints are also noticed in the domain of social status, where teachers take an indecisive position regarding the statement *the cause of an individual's poverty is their lack of motivation for finding a job* ( $M = 2.7$ ), while agreeing with the statement *compared*

to men, women in Croatia are in an economically more disadvantaged position ( $M = 3.7$ ). From their personal point of view, low levels of sensitivity were not expressed by the teachers towards any of the aspects of diversity. From the teachers' professional point of view, however, there is an observed statistically significantly lower level of sensitivity towards differences based on social status and gender. (cf. Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Results of the one-sample t-test – levels of the teachers' professional sensitivity towards particular aspects of diversity*

Aspects of diversity	Beliefs	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity	Professional	258	3.59	2.762	257	.006
Social status	Professional	260	3.08	-7.842	259	.000
Abilities	Professional	262	3.42	-1.867	261	.063
Gender	Professional	259	2.90	-13.586	258	.000
Sexual orientation	Professional	263	4.55	18.165	262	.000
Religion	Professional	261	4.16	12.050	260	.000

*N* – number of participants, *M* – arithmetic mean, *t* – value of the *t*-test, *df* – degrees of freedom, *p* – statistical significance

For the part of the questionnaire that examined the professional beliefs of the teachers based on social status, the participants express disagreement with the statement that *teachers frequently have lower expectations from students of a lower socio-economic status* ( $M = 2.6$ ). As for the area of gender diversity, they disagree with the statement that *men have more opportunities for success in natural sciences than women* ( $M = 2.6$ ). The teachers are indecisive in the domain of professional beliefs regarding linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity, and towards abilities. With respect to linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity, the teachers' uncertainty is reflected in the obtained mean value for the statement *education in Croatia is not adjusted to the needs of minority/migration groups* ( $M = 3.2$ ), while in the area of abilities, the mean value obtained for the statement *teachers should group students according to their abilities* was  $M = 2.9$ .

In the professional domain, teachers show a high level of sensitivity towards differences between individuals based on sexual orientation and religious affiliation. The participants entirely disagree with the statement *homosexuals should not work in schools* ( $M = 1.5$ ), but with respect to religious affiliation, they agree with the statement that *it would be good if teachers and students were familiar with characteristics of different religions* ( $M = 4.4$ ).

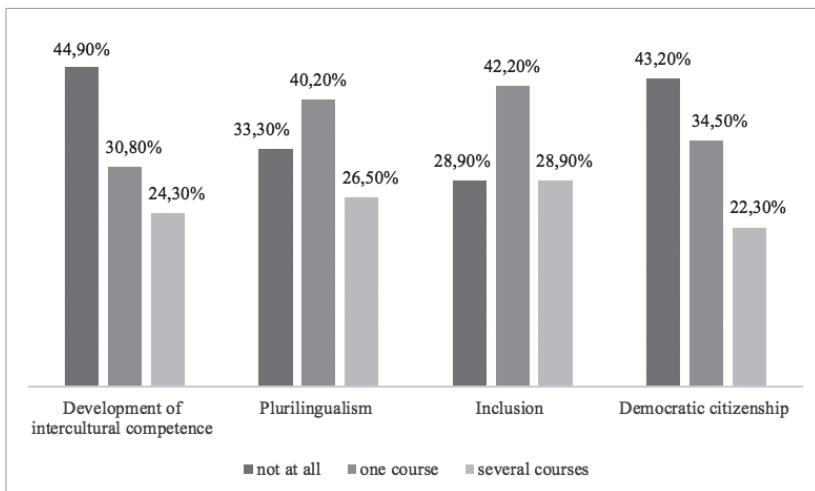
## Differences in the personal and professional beliefs of teachers

### *Differences with respect to initial education*

In order to examine differences in the personal and professional beliefs of teachers with respect to their initial education, the participants were asked, inter alia, to mark the degree to which particular topics related to diversity had been present in their programme of study. As can be seen from the data in Graph 1, the highest number of participants stated that they had encountered issues of inclusion during their initial education, with 42.2% reporting that the topic had been represented in at least one course and 28.9% stating that they had encountered this issue in several courses during their programme of study. According to their estimates, an almost equal number of participants encountered the issue of multilingualism within one course (40.2%) or several courses (26.5%) during their study. The topics that more than 40% of participants did not encounter at all during their initial education were democratic citizenship (43.2%) and development of intercultural competence (44.9%)

### Graph 1

*Estimate of the representation of particular topics in the teachers' initial education expressed in percentages*



Although the values shown in Graph 1 indicate differences in the participants' familiarity with particular aspects of diversity, a correlation between initial education and the personal and professional beliefs of teachers was not established. In order to examine differences between the teachers according to

their personal and professional beliefs and with respect to their previous education, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. The results of the analysis did not show statistically significant differences in personal beliefs (Development of intercultural competence:  $F = 2.075$ ,  $p = .128$ ; Plurilingualism:  $F = .495$ ,  $p = .610$ ; Inclusion:  $F = .276$ ,  $p = .759$ ; Democratic citizenship:  $F = .863$ ,  $p = .423$ ), nor in the professional beliefs of the participants (Development of intercultural competence:  $F = .498$ ,  $p = .608$ ; Plurilingualism:  $F = 1.039$ ,  $p = .356$ ; Inclusion:  $F = .463$ ,  $p = .630$ ; Democratic citizenship:  $F = .700$ ,  $p = .497$ ) with respect to their estimate of the representation of particular content related to diversity during their course of study.

#### *Differences with respect to work experience*

As in the case of previous education, statistically significant differences in the teachers' beliefs were not encountered with respect to years of work experience. Considering that for professional beliefs, the assumption of the homogeneity of variance was not satisfactory, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied (Personal beliefs:  $F = .639$ ,  $p = .635$ ; Professional beliefs:  $H = 9.200$ ,  $p = .056$ ).

According to the mean values shown in Table 4, greater deviations in the personal beliefs of the participants with respect to years of work experience are not observed (from  $M = 3.86$  to  $M = 3.97$ ). As for the professional beliefs of the teachers, those with 4 to 6 years of work experience ( $M = 3.36$ ) and those with 19 to 30 years of work experience ( $M = 3.41$ ) have a somewhat lower level of sensitivity towards diversity than their older and younger colleagues. The highest level of professional sensitivity towards diversity ( $M = 3.61$ ) was detected among teachers who have just entered the profession.

**Table 4**

*Personal and professional beliefs of the teachers regarding diversity with respect to years of work experience*

Years of work experience	N	Personal beliefs		Professional beliefs	
		M	SD	M	SD
1-3	37	3.97	.42515	3.61	.44952
4-6	39	3.89	.45323	3.36	.53573
7-18	87	3.96	.40418	3.55	.33386
19-30	64	3.86	.44725	3.41	.36396
31-40 and more	37	3.92	.50366	3.57	.37133
Total	264	3.91	.43865	3.50	.40568

N - number of participants, M - arithmetic mean, SD - standard deviation

### *Differences with respect to professional position*

Statistically significant differences in the participants' beliefs were established only for their professional position and only with respect to the teachers' professional beliefs. The results of the t-test for independent samples with respect to professional position are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Results of the t-test for independent samples – comparison of participants' professional beliefs with respect to their professional position (classroom teacher or subject teacher)*

Aspects of diversity	Professional position	N	M	t	df	p																																														
Linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity	Classroom teacher	94	3.59	.122	253	.903																																														
	Subject teacher	161	3.58				Social status	Classroom teacher	95	2.87	-2.810	255	.005	Subject teacher	162	3.18	Abilities	Classroom teacher	96	3.54	2.114	257	.035	Subject teacher	163	3.35	Gender	Classroom teacher	95	2.79	-1.885	254	.061	Subject teacher	161	2.96	Sexual orientation	Classroom teacher	97	4.50	-.491	258	.624	Subject teacher	163	4.56	Religion	Classroom teacher	95	4.07	-1.224	256
Social status	Classroom teacher	95	2.87	-2.810	255	.005																																														
	Subject teacher	162	3.18				Abilities	Classroom teacher	96	3.54	2.114	257	.035	Subject teacher	163	3.35	Gender	Classroom teacher	95	2.79	-1.885	254	.061	Subject teacher	161	2.96	Sexual orientation	Classroom teacher	97	4.50	-.491	258	.624	Subject teacher	163	4.56	Religion	Classroom teacher	95	4.07	-1.224	256	.222	Subject teacher	163	4.21						
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*N* – number of participants, *M* – arithmetic mean, *t* – value of the t-test, *df* – degrees of freedom, *p* – statistical significance

The values shown in Table 5 indicate statistically significant differences in the professional beliefs of the classroom teachers and subject teachers related to social status ( $p = .005$ ) and ability ( $p = .035$ ). Although the range of arithmetic means for both groups of participants and for both aspects of diversity show that the classroom teachers and subject teachers are generally undetermined, the results of the t-test show that the subject teachers have a somewhat higher level of sensitivity towards diversity based on social status, while the classroom teachers have a somewhat higher sensitivity towards differences based on abilities.

## Discussion

The research presented provides an insight into the personal and professional beliefs of primary school teachers on diversity. The results show that teachers' personal beliefs on diversity are statistically more positive than their professional beliefs, which is in agreement with some previous research findings of Chiner et al. (2015). The total mean value on the scale of personal beliefs ( $M = 3.91$ ) indicates a high level of the participants' sensitivity towards diversity. In the area of professional beliefs, the participants are at the middle part of the scale ( $M = 3.50$ ), which means that their professional beliefs are undetermined.

With respect to particular components of diversity, correspondences between the personal and professional beliefs of the teachers are noticeable with regard to sexual orientation, towards which the participants show a high level of sensitivity in both domains. Professionally, the level of the teachers' sensitivity towards sexual orientation in comparison to other diversity variables is the highest, followed by a high level of openness towards religious diversity. A possible explanation for the sensitivity towards sexual orientation can be found in the structure of the participants, the vast majority of whom were female (90.5%). In addition to having more positive attitudes towards homosexuals (Longin, 2014; Parmač, 2005), research shows that women demonstrate a greater readiness for inclusion in activities directed towards improving their social status (Huić et al., 2016). Besides their beliefs regarding sexual orientation, teachers' personal and professional beliefs are also identical with respect to linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. In this respect, teachers' personal and professional beliefs are undetermined, i.e., it is possible that the personal beliefs of teachers influence their professional beliefs in this aspect of diversity. These results complement the results of a national survey of Croatian citizens' attitudes towards cultural diversity, which showed that almost every third citizen does not have a firm attitude regarding the role of minorities in Croatian society. This "points to significant confusion and indetermination regarding majority-minority relationships and perhaps even social conformism" (Mesić & Bagić, 2011, p. 17).

Teachers show differences in personal and professional beliefs with respect to diversity based on gender, social status and abilities. In the domain of personal beliefs, the participants have a highly developed sensitivity towards gender diversity, while in the domain of professional beliefs this sensitivity is low. Such discrepancies between personal and professional aspects of life have been shown by other research conducted among high school teachers (c.f. Baranović et al., 2008) according to which teachers in Croatia have a developed



awareness of gender equality, but nonetheless readily discriminate against students based on gender. It seems that in education, gender awareness has not been sufficiently developed, and that the traditional view of gender inequality still prevails (Baranović & Jugović, 2011). A similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to differences in teachers' personal and professional beliefs related to issues of social status. Teachers' personal beliefs towards differences based on social status are undetermined, while professionally they show a low degree of sensitivity. Although numerous international studies (e.g., Mostafa, 2020; Mullis, 2023) indicate that students' social status affects their educational achievement, it seems that teachers do not have a sufficiently developed awareness of this issue. The divergence between personal and professional beliefs of teachers becomes distinct with respect to differences based on abilities. In the domain of personal beliefs, teachers show a high degree of sensitivity, but they are undetermined from their professional viewpoint. The findings in the area of personal beliefs are comparable with the results of research conducted on the general population indicating positive attitudes among the majority of citizens of the Republic of Croatia towards persons and children with disabilities (e.g., Najman Hižman et al., 2008; Vidaković et al., 2022). From the professional point of view, the indetermination of teachers towards issues of ability could be a result of their experiences in teaching practice, which, as indicated in the introduction of this paper, could also shape their beliefs.

Although previous research has indicated that differences in the professional beliefs of teachers with respect to years of work experience are statistically significant (Cardona, 2005; Chiner et al., 2015), the present research did not establish such differences. However, the mean values obtained for professional beliefs show that teachers with fewer years of work experience have a higher level of sensitivity towards differences than their more experienced colleagues, which is consistent with previous research. Considering the fact that teachers' beliefs change and form depending on their experiences in teaching (Giambo & Szecsi, 2007), it seems that teachers professionally become less sensitive towards differences with more work experience. This opens the question regarding the cause of this change in the professional beliefs of teachers, particularly if we consider the fact that their personal beliefs on differences remain mostly positive regardless of work experience.

In addition to the influence of work experience on teachers' beliefs, previous research also shows a correlation between initial education and the degree of openness of teachers towards particular components of diversity (Cvikić & Novak Milić, 2015; Skočić Mihić et al., 2016) or diversity in general (Giambo & Szecsi, 2007). The present research established that the teachers had courses

in their initial teacher education in which issues of diversity were discussed, but the correlation between the representation of particular courses in the programme of study and the participants' beliefs did not emerge as statistically significant. If we take into account research results that have established the influence of initial teacher education on the formation of the positive beliefs of teachers towards diversity (Puttick et. al., 2021) and results of the international TALIS 2018 research (Markočić Dekanić et al., 2019b), according to which teachers in the Republic of Croatia feel the least prepared for teaching students of various abilities and for teaching in a multicultural and plurilingual environment, the issue of initial teacher education in the Republic of Croatia regarding diversity should definitely be explored in more detail. According to the results obtained, possible changes in programmes of study should take place.

Statistically significant differences in the participants' beliefs were established only with respect to professional position, and only for two components of diversity in the domain of professional beliefs. Compared to classroom teachers, subject teachers show a somewhat higher level of sensitivity towards differences based on social status. On the other hand, classroom teachers show a higher level of sensitivity towards abilities than subject teachers. The reason for the higher sensitivity of subject teachers towards differences based on social status could be found in the greater likelihood of differences between students coming to the fore in the higher grades of primary school (Markočić Dekanić et. al., 2019a). Classroom teachers' greater sensitivity towards students' abilities could be explained from the point of view of their initial teacher education. Courses related to issues of inclusion have been present for around 35 years in the initial teacher education of classroom teachers, and the correlation between teachers' beliefs on inclusion and the representation of such content in their programme of study has been demonstrated empirically (Skočić Mihić & Gabrić, 2016). Nonetheless, considering that statistically significant differences between classroom teachers and subject teachers have not been established, except for in the areas of ability and social status, it is not possible to make general conclusions on the differences between the professional beliefs of teachers with respect to their professional position.

## **Conclusion**

The research conducted has certain limitations that should be taken into account in the interpretation of the results obtained. Considering the characteristics of the instrument applied in the research and the sample size, the results described provide only an initial depiction of the personal and professional

beliefs of primary school teachers on diversity in the broader sense, and therefore primarily present a foundation for further research in this area. As the results show that teachers' personal beliefs regarding diversity are more positive than their professional beliefs, it is particularly important that future research include issues related to factors that influence teachers' professional beliefs in order to better understand this finding. Likewise, the finding that teachers with more work experience become less sensitive professionally towards differences requires comprehensive research on the possible causes of this development in their professional work. Moreover, it suggests that all issues dealing with diversity in teaching should be part of teachers' professional development on an ongoing basis, as diversity is not a static but a dynamic construct that changes over the years. Differences in the degree of professional openness of teachers towards particular components of diversity indicate that initial teacher education should include issues of diversity more comprehensively. In particular, the topic of diversity should be coherently integrated within the programme of study and not introduced through several unrelated courses, as is currently the case. This conclusion is supported by the finding that there are no statistically significant differences between the surveyed teachers with respect to the presence of content related to diversity in their initial education, and that there are no statistically significant differences in the beliefs of classroom teachers and subject teachers whose initial teacher education differs considerably.

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