



**International Network for School Social Work**

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## **Electronic Newsletter June 2019**

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### **A Study of Parental Hostile Communication against Primary School Teachers: Experience from Croatia**

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The Republic of Croatia is located in the Balkan region on the Adriatic Sea. From 1945 to 1990 Croatia was part of Yugoslavia within the communist regime. On October 8<sup>th</sup> 1991 the Croatian parliament declared independence and decided to end relations with Yugoslavia. The Croatian War of Independence followed soon after, ending in 1995. In that period more than 25% of the economy was destroyed, approximately 20,000 people were killed and more than 130,000 people migrated as refugees. Today Croatia is a country with a parliamentary system and a population of 4.15 million people where the official language is Croatian.

#### **Croatian schools**

The school system is based on three levels: mandatory primary school, secondary school (not mandatory) and university education. One of the major issues in the school system is based on differences in parents' and teachers' expectations regarding the educational system and students' training. Extensive and demanding school programs, as well as the pressure on students to achieve high grades at the primary and secondary levels have contributed to this difference. High grades in primary school provide students better possibilities for choice of secondary school and for university enrollment. Also, parents' active engagement in school is more present in the last decade than before. They often expect the school to teach students study skills, effective coping strategies to control their emotions and behavior, while teachers expect that students already have learned manners and good behavior from their families. This produces pressure on students and teachers, sometimes increases students' behavioral and psychological problems and points to inadequate cooperation between parents and teachers.

#### **School social work in Croatia**

Before 2008 social workers were employed in many primary schools as partners in the professional school team. In 2008 the Croatian parliament accepted changes in the Law on Primary and Secondary Education and voted to exclude social workers from the school team of experts. The school team would include librarians, pedagogues, psychologists, social pedagogues, speech therapist and educational rehabilitator. Now social workers have been dropped from the team with an explanation that social work is not an educational profession and has no significant contribution to the educational process. Today there are only six school social workers in the whole country.

They work in primary schools and none of these positions will be renewed after their retirement. These social workers are focused on prevention of violence, working with students with behavioral problems, truancy, work with students with disabilities and providing support to children exposed to family risks. To resolve these school problems they apply counseling with students and parents on a daily basis, consulting with teachers and other professionals at the school, and working with police, social welfare, school doctors and non-government organizations. They also do home visits to gain a better understanding of family dynamics and the home situation.

### **The Study**

In recent years there is a new challenge that teachers and social workers are faced with, parental hostile communication against teachers. The aim of this study was to explore the nature, frequency and causes of parental hostility against teachers from the teachers' perspective. Seventy primary school teachers participated in the study, representing the full range of years of teaching experience. The average age of respondents was 38 years and 99% female (compared with 82% of the whole teacher population). An online survey with 24 questions was used to explore the nature and frequency of aggressive parental behavior during a school year.

Results showed that conflict between parents and teachers was an infrequent, but troubling, occurrence. More than 50% of teachers had experienced some form of aggression from parents' hostile communication. Psychological violence is the most common, including threats experienced by 23% of teachers, yelling by 32%, personal insults by 42%, humiliation by 37%, mockery by 26%, false accusation by 54 %, swearing and attacking by 60% and blackmail by 14% of teachers. Teachers estimated that the most common causes of conflict with parents are disagreement over their child's behavior and learning skills, with parents blaming the teacher for the low grades and for neglecting the child's educational needs, and parental interference with the teacher's job. Causes of conflict that appear rarely are disciplinary measures given to the student, peer-violence, aggression toward teachers, inappropriate dressing, and non-supportive parental attitude toward school.

Teachers have experienced parents' hostile communication mostly in classrooms, then on the Internet and telephone as well as in the principal's office, school yard, school corridor, school parking area, cafes and other public places.

The majority of the teachers reported that their formal training did not prepare them to cope with hostile communications with parents and 96% of them recognized the need for additional education in conflict resolution skills to help them work with hostile parents.

### **The need for improved parent-teacher communications**

This research indicates that parental hostile communication against teachers is an issue in Croatian primary schools, which according to Modesti is a problem in other countries too such as in Canada and the UK (<https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/904/291>). This indicates the need for training in skills for coping with aggressive interactions and more support for teachers, both of which are common roles for school social workers. This is just one example of how school social workers support the school's mission to improve academic outputs and psychosocial development of the students. It is hoped that school social workers will again make their professional contribution in Croatia and that preventing aggression towards teachers by improving parent-teacher communications will be one of their responsibilities. However, till today there is no state strategy, but only academics and non-governmental initiatives for reinstating social work in primary and secondary schools.