

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Poklicni razvoj učitelja v osnovni šoli

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Abstract

Knowledge societies make new demands and expectations of teachers that require changes in their roles and abilities. Teachers must be open to change, prepared to improve their qualifications, and motivated for constant professional development. This also requires the support of head teachers. Through quantitative research, we were able to get a closer look at the opinions elementary school teachers have of their own possibilities for professional development as well as the obstacles they face along the way. The results of the research were compared with theoretical findings, and directions and recommendations for practice were suggested.

Keywords: Teacher, elementary school, career, development, work experience.

Izvleček

Družba znanja postavlja pred učitelje nove zahteve in pričakovanja, ki zahtevajo spremembe v učiteljevi vlogi in njegovi usposobljenosti zanje. Učitelji morajo biti odprti za spremembe, krepiti morajo različne kompetence in biti motivirani za svoj stalni poklicni razvoj. Pri tem pa morajo imeti tudi podporo ravnatelja. S kvantitativno raziskavo smo pridobili ožji, bolj poglobljen pogled učiteljev osnovnih šol na možnosti za poklicni razvoj in na spodbude ter ovire, s katerimi se pri tem srečujejo. Pridobljene podatke smo primerjali z izsledki v teoriji ter predlagali usmeritve in priporočila za prakso.

Ključne besede: učitelj, osnovna šola, kariera, razvoj, delovne izkušnje

1 Introduction

We live in a knowledge society. It is a society of constant change, quick decision making, and lifelong learning, where a different set of skills than that in the past is needed for a quality life. The basic condition for the successful development and acquirement of skills is an efficient and quality education system run by highly trained teachers (Pekljaj, 2008). Schools that produce the best results use development strategies to improve school and teacher progress as well as student achievement (Sentočnik, 2006). They recognize that cooperation with other schools and educational institutions is a necessity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000), as scientific developments are reflected in all parts of society (Pekljaj, 2008). Every generation of future teachers that is entering education will have

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a decisive impact on the educational system (Hargreaves, 2003; McBeath & Mortimore, 2001; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Zeller Mayer & Tabak, 2006).

All this has a great impact on the role of teachers and requires thorough improvements and reforms in teacher education (Zelena knjiga, 2001). Lifelong learning must become an essential element in the teachers' professional development. Yet the identified challenges require a different approach in the treatment of teachers from Slovene elementary schools and their leaderships as well as the acceptance of changes in education paradigms from the teachers. Thus, in this article we present the findings of research conducted from April to May 2012 to determine how elementary school teachers view the factors that determine their career development. Do they see them in a positive or a negative light? How important are these factors, and do the teachers have well-developed career goals?

It is important to emphasize that we were not interested in determining some general teacher satisfaction level. Rather, our focus was on the opinions elementary school teachers have of their professional development, particularly in connection with the educational system and their work and home environment. However, the current economic situation and social climate, as well as the influence such a climate can have on the professional development of elementary school teachers, has to be taken into account.

The article is divided into five parts. The introductory part is followed by an overview of current literature on teacher career development. The third part describes the empirical research that was conducted. The fourth part gives the results of the research, and the last part presents the most important findings and recommendations for further research.

2 Teacher Professional Development

Mone and London (2000) wrote that careers are work processes by which individuals aim to achieve set goals by improving their professional qualifications. Planning professional development is a conscious process in which individuals become aware of their personal career attributes (Randhawa, 2007). Careers have to be planned and developed in accordance with the individual's interests, capabilities, and values as well as the demands of the workplace (Biloslavo, 2008; Možina, 2002; Oldroyd, 2003; Peček, 2000; Tavčar, 2002). Organizations increasingly see professional development as a means of connecting the individual's goals to the demands of the workplace (Lipičnik, 2002; Simonsen, 1997).

Teacher professional development is an individual-oriented process (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000; Laursen, 2003) that incorporates several new roles and tasks: the reorientation from teaching to learning, the ability to work with different types of students, the use of modern information technologies, and the necessity of cooperation with coworkers, parents, the wider community, etc. (Simons, Linden, & Duffy, 2000).

Teacher professional development is influenced by both endogenous (i.e., the teacher's beliefs and values; Javornik Krečič, 2008; Marentič Požarnik, 2007) and exogenous factors (i.e., the introduction of changes, formal and non-formal teacher education and training, school leadership, and education reforms; Erčulj, 2005; Gordon, 2004; Kalin, 2004). Professional development is essential as the knowledge acquired during the teacher's initial education and training period is no longer sufficient for dealing with the complexity and unpredictability of modern school work (Goodson, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000).

The dedication of teachers to continuous professional development is at the same time a process that requires their independence as well as responsibility toward themselves and their work (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). According to *Zelena knjiga* (2001), "Quality teacher education that ensures quality upbringing, education, and qualification must be the guiding goal of education policy." It is also important that teachers begin teaching immediately after concluding their studies to ensure that they gain new skills and abilities, form their interests and professional values (Brečko, 2006), become initiated in the workplace, and start the process of professional socialization. Several authors (Brečko, 2006; Konrad, 1996; Schein, 1987) have noted the fact that further education following initial teacher education has a large impact on lesson quality (Javornik Krečič, 2008).

Authors have also attempted to define the phases of teacher development. Razdevšek Pučko (1990) noted that teacher development goes through the following phases: the period of idealized notions, the period of survival, and the period of experience. Valentič Zuljan (2001) summed up the work of several authors (Berliner, 1989; Sheckley & Allen, 1991) to develop a five-phase model of teacher development: novice teacher, beginner teacher, skilled teacher, successful teacher, and expert teacher.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) subsequently added a time component to their definition:

- *Beginning*: the phase of survival and discovery. Lasts from the first to the third year of teaching;
- *Stabilization*: teachers finally commit to their careers and develop teaching skills. They make contacts with other teachers and exchange advice with them. During this period, teachers are still being put to the test. Lasts from the fourth to the sixth year of teaching;
- *Experimentation and reassessment*: teachers begin experimenting with innovative teaching approaches and new materials and exercises. They grow in maturity and responsibility and begin reassessing their careers. Vertical promotion becomes available. The phase lasts from the seventh to the eighteenth year of teaching;
- *Serenity and Conservatism*: late career period. The enthusiasm and energy of teachers begins to wane, although this is compensated by a greater feeling of trust. Teachers grow skeptical toward structural education reforms and

can develop feelings of embitterment and disappointment. Lasts from the nineteenth to the thirtieth year of teaching;

- *Disengagement*: teachers become dissatisfied with the progress of their students and with the students' parents. They slowly begin to disengage from the profession. This can be either peaceful or embittered, with senior teachers (who enjoy better teaching schedules and teach classes they prefer) being the exception. This phase lasts from the thirty-first to the fortieth year of teaching.

The transitions between individual phases are always fluid and harmonious. Recognizing individual phases of teacher development in elementary schools is particularly important from the point of view of educational planning, teacher motivation, and management of interpersonal relations at work.

Professional development in elementary schools can also be understood in terms of vertical and horizontal promotion (Konrad, 1996; Merkač Skok, 2005):

- Vertical promotion: the teacher is promoted to a position of greater authority (teacher–head of branch school–deputy head teacher–head teacher)
- Horizontal promotion: the teacher is promoted to a position of greater responsibility but without greater authority—namely, promotion through titles (*mentor–svetovalec–svetnik*) and higher pay grades

As has already been mentioned, one of the key exogenous factors in a teacher's professional development is school leadership (i.e., the head teacher), which has been confirmed by several surveys conducted by the OECD (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006), as well as others (Hopkins 2001; West, Jackson, Harris, & Hopkins, 2000). Quality leadership is required for teacher motivation (Ferjan, 1999), work satisfaction (Moretti & Moretti, 2012) and school teaching quality (Evans, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003).

3 Empirical Research

The aim of our work was to gain a closer look at the factors that impact the professional development of elementary school teachers, particularly in view of the absence of pre-existing empirical research on teachers' careers and the challenges posed by modern education.

3.1 Methodology

The instrument of the research was a closed-ended online questionnaire based on similar questionnaires from the available literature (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2005; Merkač Skok, 2005; Rižnar, 2008; Sagadin, 1993), which were further adjusted for the purpose of our work. The questionnaire was tested on a randomly selected pilot group of 10 elementary school teachers. There were no comprehension difficulties, but parts of the questionnaire were amended based on their replies. The final version of the questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of four demographic questions. The second part

consisted of nine questions on the professional development of teachers in elementary schools.

The survey was conducted through the Centre of Social Informatics at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana. The electronic questionnaire was sent by e-mail to head teachers of elementary schools in Slovenia, along with a corresponding note informing them of the goal and intention of our research. The head teachers then sent the questionnaires on to their teachers. The responses to every questionnaire were checked and analyzed using descriptive data analysis—namely, univariate analysis (frequency, share, cumulative share, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, range) and bivariate analysis (analysis of variance).

3.2 Sample Description

All teachers with internet access from 450 schools with branches in Slovenia were included in a random sample. Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2012a) indicate that 15,598 teachers were employed in elementary schools in the 2010–2011 school year. We received 367 completed questionnaires (2.4% response rate). Of these, 313 of the respondents were female (85.3%) and 54 were male (14.7%). Additional relevant demographic data are summarized in the following:

- Level of education: 239 respondents (65.1%) had undergraduate university education, 83 respondents (22.6%) had short-cycle higher education, 33 respondents (9.0%) had higher education, and 12 respondents (3.3%) had postgraduate university education
- Title: 163 respondents (44.4%) held the title of adviser (*svetovalec*), 115 respondents (31.3%) held the title of mentor (*mentor*), 56 respondents (15.3%) held no title, and 33 respondents (9.0%) held the title of counselor (*svetnik*)
- Work experience: 108 respondents (29.4%) had 21–30 years of work experience, 101 respondents (27.5%) had 0–10 years of work experience, 98 respondents (26.7%) had 11–20 years of work experience, and 60 respondents (16.3%) had more than 30 years of work experience

The representativeness of the sample for gender (88% of teachers in the 2011–2012 school year were women) and education level was confirmed using data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2012b).

4 Survey Results

The second part of the questionnaire was further divided into five parts to make analysis easier:

- course of professional development (3 questions)
- support with professional development (2 questions)
- professional development steps (1 question)
- factors of professional development and their influence (2 questions)
- future goals (1 question)

4.1 Course of Professional Development

Who is responsible for the teacher's professional development? Table 1 indicates that most respondents believe that it is the teachers themselves who are responsible for professional development, mostly in cooperation with the head teacher or the school leadership. This fits Merkač Skok's (2005, p. 24) explanation of the responsibility for staff and role division in organizations: "The top management is responsible for philosophy, strategy, and policy in the field of human resource management. [...] Individuals are responsible for themselves, they have to undergo training, be responsive and proactive." Similarly, Fullan and Hargreaves (2000) pointed out that teachers cannot wait for the education system to change on its own and that cooperation between teachers and head teachers is the basic requirement for school and teacher professional development.

Table 1: *Who is Responsible for the Teacher's Professional Development?*

Answers	f	Amount (%)	F %
The head teacher or the school leadership	5	1.4%	1.4%
The teachers themselves	61	16.6%	18.0%
The teachers themselves in cooperation with the head teacher or the school leadership	301	82.0%	100.0%
Total	367	100.0%	

After how many years of work experience is it time to start developing your career? Table 2 shows that the right time to start developing one's career is after having had at least 11 to 20 years of work experience as an elementary school teacher. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) described this period as the phase of experimentation and reassessment, when teachers are full of energy, enthusiasm, and ambition for promotion. They start setting boundaries with students and their parents and begin resisting the head teachers. Successful teachers reach the highest point in their careers (title, personal income) during this period.

Table 2: *After How Many Years of Work Experience is It Time to Start Developing Your Career?*

Answers	f	Amount (%)	F %
0-10 years	100	27.2%	27.2%
11-20 years	239	65.1%	92.4%
21-30 years	23	6.3%	98.6%
30+ years	5	1.4%	100.0%
Total	367	100.0%	

Do you believe professional development can be planned? Table 3 demonstrates that 75.7% respondents believe that professional development can be planned. Teachers' professional development must be understood in the wider context of school progress. Erčulj, Širec and Koren (2006) list examples of the processes supporting such development, including public appearances, teacher cooperation, learning, and participation in decision making.

Table 3: *Do You Think Professional Development Can Be Planned?*

Answers	f	Amount (%)	F %
Yes	278	75.7%	75.7%
No	89	24.3%	100.0%
Total	367	100.0%	

4.2 Support with Professional Development

Are you willing to turn over the responsibility for your professional development to the school leadership? Table 4 indicates that teachers want to assume responsibility for their own careers. Today it is virtually impossible to find a successful organization that does not try to actively involve all of its employees in its functioning. Schools are no exception. Teachers must again see themselves as learners and make lifelong learning their main goal (Valenčič Zuljan, 2001). Several authors have defined teacher professional development as a career-long development process (Erčulj et al., 2006; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996). Head teachers must create a school culture open to the learning of both teachers and students (Earley & Bubb, 2004).

Table 4: *Are You Willing to Turn Over Responsibility for Your Professional Development to the School Leadership?*

Answers	f	Amount (%)	F %
Yes, I am willing to turn over responsibility for my professional development to the school leadership	30	8.2%	8.2%
No, I want to assume responsibility for my professional development	337	91.8%	100.0%
Total	367	100.0%	

Who was your biggest source of support in professional development? Table 5 shows that elementary school teachers relied on different sources of support: head teachers, coworkers, families, and/or their partners. The number of respondents who said that they had not yet built their careers corresponds with the number of respondents with 0 to 10 years of work experience.

Table 5: *Who Was Your Biggest Source of Support in Professional Development?*

Answers	f	Amount (%)	F %
I have built my career without any support	72	19.6%	19.6%
Head teacher or school leadership	91	24.8%	44.4%
My coworkers	54	14.7%	59.1%
My family, my partner	81	22.1%	81.2%
I have not yet built my career	69	18.8%	100.0%
Total	367	100.0%	

4.3 Professional Development Steps

Table 6 indicates that the respondents consider the following steps as important for their professional development:

- leading a teacher work group
- ensuring parent and student satisfaction
- receiving a promotion in title (mentor, adviser, counselor)
- promoting student success in competitions
- leading the school development team
- earning a promotion to a higher pay grade
- gaining new knowledge and skills with further training and education

In addition, two options are not considered as important professional development steps:

- becoming a member or president of the school council
- becoming the school union representative

It must be noted that the functions have no direct connection with teaching, but are part of the organizational work of the school. They can be defined as functions that—although having no formal title—carry great influence in the school (Cvetko, 2002; Konrad, 1996). That is why we believe these functions were not recognized as steps in their professional development.

The following are not considered to be either important or unimportant for professional development:

- being promoted to assistant head teacher or head teacher
- becoming a form teacher

Table 6: *Professional Development Steps: f/ Amount (%)*

Propositions	Answers (f/ Amount (%))		
	Yes	No	F %
Acquiring new skills and competencies in the field of teaching	340	27	367
	92.6%	7.4%	100.0%
Parent and student satisfaction	327	40	367
	89.1%	10.9%	100.0%
Promotion in title (mentor, adviser, counselor)	321	46	367
	87.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Student success in competitions	315	52	367
	85.8%	14.2%	100.0%
Leading the school development team	274	93	367
	74.7%	25.3%	100.0%
Promotion to higher pay grade	274	93	367
	74.7%	25.3%	100.0%
Leading a teacher work group	260	107	367
	70.8%	29.2%	100.0%
Promotion to form teacher	201	166	367
	54.8%	45.2%	100.0%
Promotion to deputy head teacher or head teacher	184	183	367
	50.1%	49.9%	100.0%
Joining the school council or becoming president of the school council	142	225	367
	38.7%	61.3%	100.0%
Becoming the school union representative	82	285	367
	22.3%	77.7%	100.0%

4.4 Factors of Professional Development and their Influence

Which factors have a positive impact on professional development, and which have a negative impact? Table 7 shows that the following factors have a positive impact on professional development:

- head teacher or school leadership
- family or home environment
- coworkers or school climate
- implementation of changes into the educational process
- free time for professional development

The following factors have a negative impact on professional development:

- inappropriate education legislation at the state level
- unsuitable or unfinished education
- inadequate professional knowledge
- state of the economy

Table 7: Factors with a Positive, Neutral, or Negative Impact on Professional Development

Factors	Answers (f/ Amount (%))			
	Positive influence	Neutral influence	Negative influence	F %
Head teacher or school leadership	258 70.3%	96 26.2%	13 3.5%	367 100.0%
Family or home environment	251 68.4%	93 25.3%	23 6.3%	367 100.0%
Coworkers or school climate	242 65.9%	101 27.5%	24 6.5%	367 100.0%
Introduction of changes into the educational process	218 59.4%	128 34.9%	21 5.7%	367 100.0%
Free time for professional development	190 51.8%	89 24.3%	88 24.0%	367 100.0%
Students' parents	128 34.9%	218 59.4%	21 5.7%	367 100.0%
Other state institutions (e.g., Ministry of Education, National Education Institute)	67 18.3%	211 57.5%	89 24.3%	367 100.0%
State of the economy	44 12.0%	92 25.1%	231 62.9%	367 100.0%
Inadequate professional knowledge	13 3.5%	46 12.5%	308 83.9%	367 100.0%
Unsuitable or unfinished education	10 2.7%	79 21.5%	278 75.7%	367 100.0%
Inappropriate education legislation on state level	2 0.5%	81 22.1%	284 77.4%	367 100.0%

Table 8: Factors Impacting Professional Development in Elementary Schools

Propositions	Total	Mean score	Standard deviation	Range
Work satisfaction	367	4.80	0.611	0.373
Professional knowledge	367	4.51	0.771	0.595
Further education	367	4.43	0.789	0.623
Free time for professional development	367	4.39	0.774	0.599
Family or work environment	367	4.20	0.888	0.788
Own financial means for professional development	367	4.08	1.008	1.015
Education level	367	4.06	1.019	1.038
Coworkers or school climate	367	4.03	0.920	0.846
Workload	367	4.02	0.871	0.759
Introduction of changes into the educational process	367	3.95	0.892	0.795
Head teacher or school leadership	367	3.86	0.977	0.954
Promotion to higher title or pay grade	367	3.79	1.074	1.154
State of the economy	367	3.79	1.072	1.148
Education legislation	367	3.49	0.994	0.988
Students' parents	367	3.26	1.102	1.214
Other state institutions (e.g., Ministry of Education, National Education Institute)	367	3.20	1.058	1.120

According to the responses, students' parents or guardians as well as institutions such as the Ministry of Education and the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia play a neutral role in professional development.

Factors impacting professional development in elementary schools. The propositions were presented in the form of a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents could indicate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "no significant influence" and 5 being "significant influence." The statistical reliability of the questionnaire was demonstrated using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.85. The propositions in Table 8 are arranged in a descending order according to mean score. The lowest mean score was 3.2., and the highest 4.8. This leads to the conclusion that the average teacher considers all the factors as important. The standard deviation ranged from 0.611 to 1.102.

Our intention was also to discover whether there were any statistically significant differences in responses (between mean scores) according to demographic data. The *t*-test showed no significant differences between female

and male respondents. No significant differences according to years of work experience were found after analysis of variance. Significant differences did appear, however, when we made comparisons according to title (analysis of variance; introducing changes into the educational process – sig. =0.043, family or home environment – sig. =0.036) and education level (coworkers and school climate – =0.013, further education – sig. =0.012, students' parents or guardians – sig. =0.029).

Figure 1 shows that the higher the title, the greater importance individual propositions have for professional development. What is also clear is that the introduction of changes into the educational process has an important influence on professional development. This confirms the findings of the available literature, which states that teachers are confronting changes brought about by educational reforms (Marentič Požarnik, 2004). These changes require additional training for teachers (Dadds, 2001; Erčulj, 2005; Kalin & Valenčič Zuljan, 2004). At the same time, teachers have to meet several other challenges, such as the changing role of the family—including their own (Marentič Požarnik, 2000).

Figure 1: Differences according to title

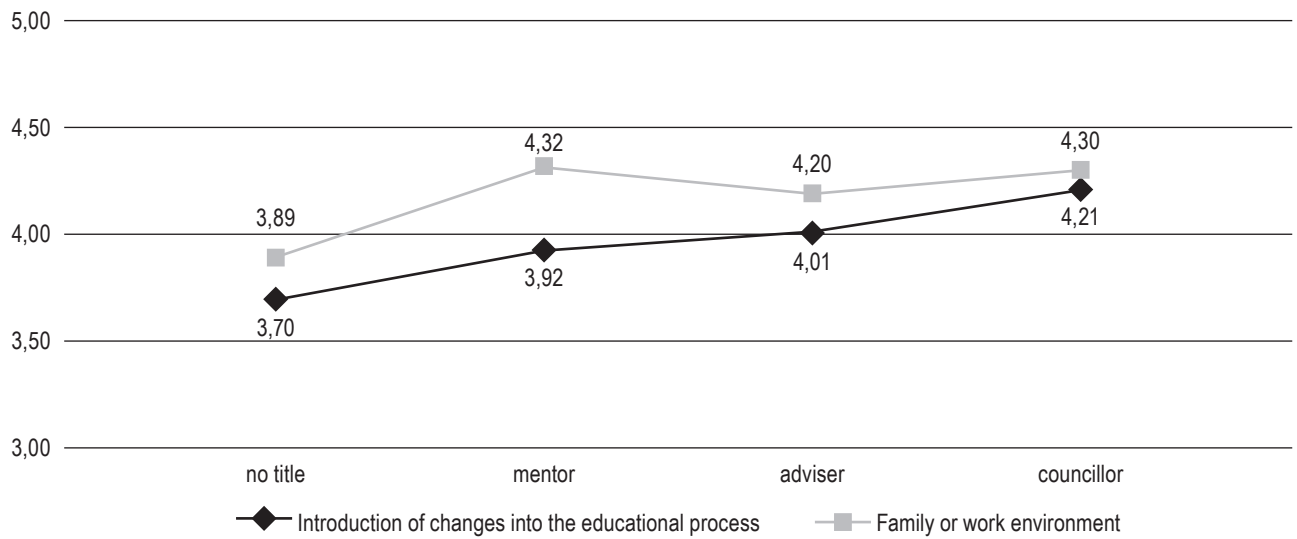


Figure 2: Differences according to education level

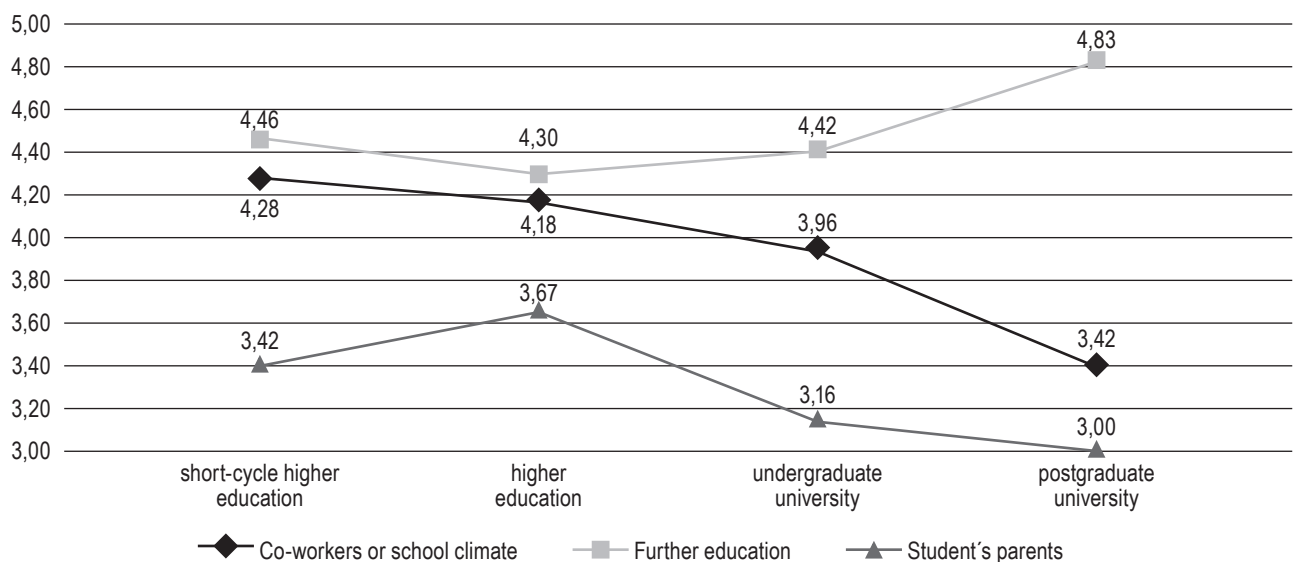


Figure 2 shows that:

- the higher the education level, the smaller the importance attached to the role of coworkers, school climate, and students' parents in professional development; and
- the higher the education level, the bigger the importance attached to further education.

The results can be explained by the fact that the standards of personal success are connected with individuals' abilities to acquire and use the knowledge with which they then contribute to the goals of the organization (Tavčar, 2005).

4.5 Teachers' Future Goals

The teachers listed the following personal future goals (listed in order of the frequency of appearance as several

answers were possible): professional growth (330), good relationship with parents/guardians and students (299), promotion in title or to higher pay grade (185), becoming a good form teacher (228), leading a teacher work group (107), acquiring a higher level of education (92), change of work environment (77), becoming a head teacher (53), and becoming a deputy head teacher (48).

5 Most Important Findings and Recommendations for Further Work

The results of our research provide an accurate look into how elementary school teachers perceive the factors of professional development. Some of the findings described in the available literature are given further confirmation and are considered anew in light of the current state of the economy.

Teachers realize that they are the ones primarily responsible for their professional development and that this requires the cooperation of the school leadership. They believe that the most appropriate time to start building their careers is after 11 to 20 years of work experience (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). At the same time, 75% of respondents believe that professional development can be planned, and they want to become actively responsible for its development. The respondents see additional training and education—as well as other variables dealing with student success and parent satisfaction—as the most important steps in their development. Satisfaction is one of the foundations upon which organizations build long-term success (Ropar, 2012), with employee–student–parent satisfaction being mutually connected. The most successful schools are flexible ones; their teachers have a clear picture of the schools' functioning and vision. Factors directly connected to the teachers (i.e., head teachers, families, coworkers) are seen as having a positive impact on professional development. Inappropriate education legislation and unsuitable education, on the other hand, are seen as having a negative impact. The latter—especially if considered in connection with the teachers' evaluation that the introduction of changes into the educational process has had an important influence on professional development—shows that teachers realize the importance lifelong education has for themselves and the school (Verbiest, 2004). What is also of interest is that teachers find self-affirmation in horizontal promotion and thus become less sensitive to the pressure of their environment (i.e., their coworkers and students' parents). This, in turn, makes them put even more value on further education. Different forms of formal and non-formal education are considered as exogenous factors of professional development (Javornik Krečič, 2007), but they also influence the teachers' beliefs and values—namely, the endogenous factors of professional development.

Therefore, we propose the following:

- school leadership should foster all forms of employee cooperation that build trust, ensure mutual support, and lead to quality work and open dialogue;
- all forms of teacher education should be promoted in order to ensure personal growth and school development;
- head teachers should take on co-responsibility for their teachers' professional development (head teachers might have different ideas about the teachers' professional development and might identify possible approaches for professional development, etc.);
- a long-term vision of human resource management based on a strong school vision should be developed;
- five-year individual teacher development plans (including action plans for further education and training, etc.) should be developed;
- individual teacher development should be incorporated into school development plans;
- teachers should be placed in leadership positions connected with planning, organization, guidance, and work control;
- teachers should have the authorization to gain new qualifications and knowledge to improve teaching quality;
- it should be possible for teachers to help create a school culture that will enable quality work and school success; and
- the school administrators should ensure a safe environment for the teachers.

The findings of our work will be of interest to teachers, head teachers, and anyone seeking employment in elementary schools. It is our hope that it will be of assistance to anyone involved in the long-term planning of professional development and that it will help them recognize the potential elementary school teachers have for both professional and school development.

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