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Being an influential pedagogical leader: Headteachers' view on necessary competences

Abstract: This research paper focuses on determining the competences that are considered necessary for a successful career as a headteacher in Croatian schools and identifying which of these competences can be developed through education. Pedagogical leadership encompasses administrative, managerial and, most of all, a pedagogical set of competences. Headteachers who practice pedagogical leadership emphasise the creation of a school environment that supports students' learning in a more effective manner. In this study, a total of 720 headteachers participated in focus group discussions and an online survey; their responses were analysed to obtain a list of top headteacher competences. Special attention was given to those competences that can be developed through education. The focus groups emphasised headteachers' expectations from initial preparation for the leading role. The findings suggest that the most important competences necessary for leading a school, assessed by headteachers, correspond to the pedagogical quality of leadership (as opposed to administrative or managerial competences): building mutual trust among staff members, creating a safe and supporting environment, engaging in professional self-development, solving problems efficiently, etc. According to the headteachers, a similar set of competences can be developed through initial education and must, therefore, be implemented in an educational program that would enable headteachers to develop exactly those competences that they feel would help them to do their job more effectively.

Keywords: competences, headteacher, mixed methodology, pedagogical leadership, school

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Introduction: School leadership as an influential practice

School leadership is considered to be a key aspect of successful school improvement worldwide, particularly in light of emerging paradigms that increase autonomy and school accountability (Sergis et al. 2018). In this respect, the role of headteachers has come into the focus of scientific discussions. Raelin (2016) recognises leadership as a practice that is important for school life, as it influences its various aspects: it has both direct and indirect impacts on the effectiveness of schools.

The importance of school leadership stems from the fact that leadership actions refer to targeting a set of goals by synchronising all the potential of the institution in a competent manner. A headteacher, as a professional who holds a leadership position in a school, can coordinate this process (Peko et al. 2016). In other words, a headteacher is the staff member who has complete insight into the school's functioning and, therefore, the greatest opportunity to shape the culture of a particular school by cooperating with other employees, students, and their parents.

In addition to the executive role in terms of leading, the main purpose of school leadership is to make the most of available resources, either material or human, in order to fulfil the school's mission. In addition to the school's mission, there is also the collective vision of a school. According to North and Kumta (2018, p. 125), headteachers are the “visionary context designers” of a school. This vision of the school is based on personal values, which are inseparable from leadership (Barret 2017; Peleg 2012). The existing values are supported by educational policies (either transparent or not) and are reflected in the school culture.

The co-creation of a supportive school culture—characterised by constructive communication, appreciation of diversity, and individuality—calls for well-trained staff, a student-centred teaching process, and adequate school leadership. There is a constant search for innovative ways of leading a school towards improved practices of teaching so that the school can become an institution that is involved in continuous learning (OECD 2001).

It is important to note that, apart from teachers' direct contribution to student achievement, the actions of the headteacher also impact student achievement (Ng 2019). School effectiveness depends on a number of interrelated educational

aspects (OECD 2013) and, therefore, adequate leadership plays an important role in overall school success, as it must provide support and opportunities for teachers and learners to grow and succeed (Mulford in Vrčelj 2018). In this manner, the management is accountable for the conditions in school (school culture). According to Peko et al. (2009), among the factors that determine student achievements and overall school success, the headteacher's ability to organise schoolwork and coordinate working processes as well as their pedagogical leadership skills and personality traits have become increasingly important.

As schools are part of a large and complex system which is coordinated by governmental bodies, national interest in education must continuously be re-evaluated (Staničić 2016; Staničić 2006). Apart from a top-down approach to educational reforms, there is a need to acknowledge the voice from the field as well in the opposite – the bottom up approach (Ganon-Shilon and Schecker 2018; Earley and Greany 2017). Hence, in the bottom-up approach, headteachers are the professionals on the field who have the authority, responsibility, and the opportunity to influence school culture the most (Hellström and Hagquist 2019; Peko and Varga 2017; Peko et al. 2016; Strategy of Education, Science and Technology 2015). The fact that schools strive to be more efficient calls for further development of the competences of headteachers. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the competences of headteachers in the Croatian educational context by exploring those competences from the perspective of headteachers.

Headteachers in Croatia: Qualifications and competences

In Croatia, the intention is to make the switch from a system in which a headteacher serves a (political) function within a school to a system in which being a headteacher is a profession based on licensing (Vican et al. 2016; Vršnik Perše et al. 2015). In the process of professionalization of headship, one of the necessary steps is to determine the requisite competences.

The reason why a headteacher is not perceived as a professional but as someone who is merely occupying the leading position at a school is the fact that a headteacher is appointed by the school board, where three out of seven members are local government officials along with two teachers, one non-teaching staff member, and one parental representative; the only prescribed qualification is a minimum of five years of teaching experience (Kovač et al. 2017; Zakon o osnovnom školstvu 2003). According to the European Commission (2013), Croatia is one of the few countries in the EU that does not provide training programs for headteachers prior to them taking up their duties. When selecting candidates for headteachers, the competences necessary to perform their tasks are not considered at all. In addition, Croatia is the third-ranked country (after Spain and Serbia) in terms of the number of headteachers reporting that they have not been trained for certain relevant topics regarding educational management and leadership (e.g. pedagogical leadership). Croatia has the largest number of principals (45%) who reported that their training for acquiring headteachers' competences was none or weak (OECD 2014).

Currently, there is an ongoing harmonization of the Croatian education system with that of other countries in the European Union (EU). Kovač and Staničić (2019) report on the raised awareness of the importance and necessity of defining and adopting national competency standards for headteachers. Croatia aims to join those countries that have an obligatory education for (prospective) headteachers at a national level (Fegeš and Kovač 2017). In the EU, it is of vital importance for headteachers to be able to develop the capacities and qualities required to take on a greater number of everyday responsibilities in a school (Council of the European Union 2009). Among the European countries that have carefully designed programs for the professional training of headteachers, Finland can serve as an example, where there is a two-year graduate study programme for prospective headteachers and even a doctoral study at the Institute of Educational Leadership at the Jyväskylä University (Pokka 2015). The Finnish education for headteachers exhibits quality based on linking theory and practice, learning in small groups, etc. (Risku and Pulkkinen 2016). There are several other European countries worth mentioning as examples of systematic school leadership training, such as Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Slovenia.

According to Drandić (2019), there are numerous issues concerning headship in Croatia that must be addressed on the path towards professionalization, many of which are related to headteachers' competences:

- Occupational, qualification, and competency standards, as well as the indicators to measure the quality of leadership in educational institutions, have not been established.
- There are no verifiable criteria for election and, in particular, the re-election of headteachers; moreover, there is no job security of headteachers after the end of their mandate.
- Unlike teachers and other education staff, the leaders of educational institutions cannot be appointed to a higher academic rank.
- The headteacher's salary is not raised if the complexity of their job increases.
- Headteachers have major responsibilities and obligations, but do not have the option to hire an assistant headteacher; the current role of headteachers—that is, their duties, authorities, and responsibilities—indicates that the headteacher is treated as a function rather than a profession.
- There is a lack of autonomy for headteachers in terms of decision-making, thereby reducing the corresponding responsibility for the quality of school functioning.
- It is necessary to examine the quality of the relationship between headteachers and school boards; moreover, the current system for the professional development of headteachers is not considered appropriate.

The most prominent issue refers the fact that Croatia is one of the few European countries where there is no systematic institutional education for headteachers before they assume their position and there is a lack of continuous professional development after they have assumed their position (Schleicher 2015); however,

there has been considerable progress in that area. Kovač and Staničić (2019) note that the call for professionalization is as old as the Croatian state and remains an unfulfilled task ever since. For the previous two decades, it has been about conceptualization without application (Peko et al. 2016). Rogić (2017) indicates some progress in the fact that when the assessment of headteacher's competences becomes mandatory, it will be crucial to identify what these competences are and how to develop them. This is in-line with the Strategy of Education, Science, and Technology (2015) aimed at improving the quality of headship by institutionalizing the education of prospective headteachers that will help them develop the competences they require.

Pedagogical leadership and the necessary competences

Leadership in education has undergone several changes in terms of terminology. These changes range from »educational administration« to »educational management« to »educational leadership« and the changes have not been merely semantic (Bush 2008). The contemporary face of leadership in schools is pedagogical leadership (Peko and Varga 2017; Male and Palaiologou 2016; Leo 2016; Male and Palaiologou 2015). Simply put, the term refers to the leadership of learning processes, which encompasses both headteacher's direct and indirect influence on students' achievements.

The importance of pedagogical leadership in the process of running schools is recognised for it emphasizes the quality of instruction in the school that headteacher is leading (OECD 2013). Due to the fact that it supports teaching and learning, Slunjski (2018) sees it as an alternative concept to leadership directed at the development of human resources. Pedagogical leadership is established through ethical accountability of headteachers and their contribution to collective ethical accountability (Duignan 2012), which can be found in all educational segments when it comes to teaching and learning processes aimed at developing individuality in children and youth. Further, pedagogical leadership also calls for the role of a transformative leader (Shields 2017) who practices distributive leadership (Buchberger et al. 2019; Varga et al. 2016; Blažević 2014; Andressen et al. 2012) and is heavily grounded in the concept of competences. Moreover, there is an increasing interest in pedagogical leadership due to the need of applying competences to introduce sustainable practices in educational institutions (Andrew 2009).

Ćatić (2012) defines competences in general as forms of ability, knowledge, skills, motivation, attitudes, or expertise of an individual or a group that are required to successfully complete a certain task in private, social, or professional life. In leadership the term »competence of a person or a group describes the relationship between the tasks assigned to or assumed by the person or the group and their capability and potential to deliver the desired performance. People mobilise knowledge, skills, and behaviour to do the right thing at the right moment«. (North and Kumta 2018, p. 139) Therefore, headteachers' competences refer to their capability to act adequately in a given situation.

The approach to headship based on competences has become the dominant one in the theory and practice of leadership over the last 20 years. It emphasizes that improving the quality of educational work necessarily includes questioning these competences. What is important to acknowledge is the developmental nature of competences—that is, the fact that competence develops with education and work experience (De Simone et al. 2018). Accordingly, in theory, it is preferred for there to be a holistic understanding of competencies as knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values that are activated in the context of performing a particular task. The advantage of this approach is precisely in its flexibility and developmental dimension.

Effective headteachers achieve the right balance between leading, managing, and administrating competences (Male 2006). These three areas require different competences (Kovačić et al. 2013). First of all, a headteacher in Croatia is a legal representative of a particular school and he is legally required to organize activities of the institution, represents the institution, takes all legal actions on behalf and for the account of the institution, represents the institution in all proceedings before courts, administrative and other state bodies and legal entities with public authority (Zakon o ustanovama 2008). In other words, the headteacher is a person accountable for making sure that all the decisions and actions that are taken within the school are legally enforceable. Thus, it is important that the headteacher has developed competences in the area of administration.

The second set of competences refers to managerial work—that is, coordination of human and material resources to make the best use of them (North and Kumta 2018). This implies cooperating with different stakeholders to promote school projects, employing marketing strategies, raise funds, employing best teacher candidates, involving parents in the work of the institution, organizing staff members into teams, and securing the best possible working conditions. It is important for a school leader to follow the shared vision of what the school must become and that it is sufficiently competent to lead change towards achieving this vision.

The third set of competences deal with the application of pedagogical knowledge and skills to accomplish pedagogical leadership as is intended. It is the most prominent aspect of pedagogical leadership. The emphasis placed by pedagogical leadership on the processes of learning and teaching is the reason that this is occasionally referred to as instructional leadership. The competences related to the pedagogical aspect include all leadership activities that indirectly affect student learning and have an impact on the quality of curriculum and instruction delivered to students. This conceptualization acknowledges that headteachers have a positive impact on students' learning (Ng 2019).

A study by Puzić (2006), conducted with 120 headteachers of primary schools in Croatia, revealed that they spent 39.61% of their time focusing on the pedagogical aspect of the job, but the majority of their time (60.49%) is divided between doing tasks that require the administrative and managerial competences. This suggests that the pedagogical aspect of their job is not adequately addressed to exemplify pedagogical leadership. Instead, they are more focused on other aspects of leadership.

Thus, the question arises whether they are aware of the importance of pedagogical leadership in contemporary school settings. It is the aim of this paper to investigate which competences headteachers find necessary for successful headship.

Methodology

The study is driven by a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, aimed at the main objective and guided by the research questions defined below.

Main objective

The aim of the study was to explore the opinion of Croatian in-service headteachers with regard to the competences that they find necessary for success in the profession with the objective of analysing these competences, particularly the competences that they believe must be developed through education.

Research questions

The study focuses on finding answers to two research questions intended to lead to better understanding of headteacher competences:

- RQ1: *In the opinion of headteachers, which competences are necessary for successful headship?*
- RQ2: *In the opinion of headteachers, which competences must be developed through educational programs?*

Data collection

In order to find answers to the above questions, the following two methods were applied: focus group discussions and an online survey.

First, a total of eight focus groups were organised with 5–9 in-service headteachers per group ($N = 48$). Their professional profiles were deliberately as diverse as possible. Further, the focus groups were set up in various cities—Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, and Zadar—in order to ensure that all Croatian regions were covered. The discussions were facilitated by trained moderators and were audio-recorded. Conversations with headteachers are crucial for understanding their responses, as these responses provide insight into *how* they perceive their job and *why* they perceive it in that manner (Wilkinson 2016). Focus groups were organised as a qualitative data collection method to gain an in-depth understanding of the viewpoint of the selected headteachers on the necessary competences. The data was processed via NVivo 12 software and prepared for further use.

As the next step, a survey was distributed online in order to collect quantitative data and reach a wider range of headteachers across the nation. The constructed questionnaire reflects the three major categories of headteacher competences explored by Puzić (2006). Managerial, administrative, and pedagogical competences were used as starting points for focus group discussions. The responses from the focus groups were transformed into questionnaire items ($N = 40$). Next to each item intended to describe the competences of school headteachers was a five-point Likert scale which headteachers used to express their opinion regarding the importance of each competence for a successful career in school leadership (the scale ranged from 1 being not important and 5 being very important). On the same questionnaire, headteachers were asked to mark those competences that they believed should have been included in the educational programs for headteachers. Thereafter, their responses were grouped into two categories: one included data on the importance of each competence and the other category included data regarding the need to develop certain competences through education.

Sample

In order to collect evidence from the field, the sample comprised headteachers as participants. Those headteachers who already occupy the position are believed to have certain important insights into the required competences and their experiences in education can contribute to the existing discourse and research on effective and innovative pedagogical practice in educational leadership preparation, as is recommended in the process of developing professional standards in the field (The Croatian qualifications framework act 2013).

There are over 1300 headteachers of primary (student aged 6/7–13/14 years) and secondary schools (students aged 14/15–17/18 years) in the Republic of Croatia, and approximately 50% were involved in the study at some point, considering their various backgrounds (headteachers employed in primary vs secondary schools, grammar vs vocational schools, small vs large schools, urban vs rural schools; and headteachers with less vs more experience).

A total of 672 in-service headteachers participated in the study, out of whom 414 (61.6 %) were women and 258 (38.4%) were men. A majority of headteachers had 26–35 years of work experience in education, having completed university education themselves. They have been occupying the position of headteachers for 10.3 years on average.

Further, the participating headteachers work in schools of various sizes: 32.9% come from smaller schools with up to 200 students; 40.8% work in middle-size schools with 201–500 students; 26.3% of them are from schools with over 501 students (some with even more than 700).

Overall, there were 720 headteachers who participated in the research (48 in focus groups and 672 filled in the questionnaire). Although they have different demographic features, for the purposes of this paper, the correlation between those features and the headteachers' responses was not explored. The preliminary results are presented in the following section.

Results and discussion

In order to analyse the collected data, descriptive statistics was used. The intention was to rank headteachers' assessments made on each item in order to obtain a list including competences that headteachers found to be essential for successful headship. In the next step, we aimed to determine the frequency of headteachers' selection of particular competences which they believed must be developed through education. These competences were also ranked so that the competences on which education for headship must be based become apparent. In addition, headteachers' responses discussed in focus groups are presented for a deeper understanding of headteachers' opinions.

The importance of specific headteacher competences

First, the participants of the research determined the importance of certain competences necessary for successfully performing the job of a headteacher (Table 1).

Rank	Competence	N	M	SD	Min	Max
1	Providing rapid response in crisis situations	644	4.68	0.560	2	5
2	Building mutual trust among staff members	649	4.67	0.531	3	5
3	Creating a safe and supporting environment	642	4.66	0.565	3	5
4	Engaging in professional self-development	649	4.59	0.603	1	5
5	Adopting a clear vision for the institution	636	4.57	0.597	3	5
6	Quick and efficient problem-solving ability	644	4.56	0.622	3	5
7	Motivating staff	648	4.53	0.628	2	5
8	Conflict resolution	646	4.53	0.629	2	5
9	Collaborating with educational staff, psychologists, pedagogues etc.	659	4.51	0.644	2	5
10	Coordinating and delegating tasks	641	4.48	0.647	2	5
11	Promoting co-operation among employees	645	4.47	0.619	3	5
12,5	Effective (written and oral) communication	666	4.45	0.652	3	5
12,5	Understanding and applying legislation	653	4.45	0.608	3	5
15	Informed decision-making	649	4.43	0.549	2	5
15	Promoting responsibility among staff	669	4.43	0.633	2	5
15	Promoting professional excellence of all staff members	658	4.43	0.628	3	5
17	Promoting professional development	644	4,38	0.612	3	5
18	Tracking changes in the education system	644	4,37	0.588	2	5
19,5	Monitoring the quality of education	668	4.36	0.627	2	5
19,5	Securing the best possible working conditions	637	4.36	0.631	3	5

21	Rational management of resources	646	4.35	0.617	1	5
22	Timely addressing of daily challenges in schoolwork	670	4.33	0.611	1	5
23	Managing personal resources	639	4.32	0.542	2	5
24	Setting attainable goals	644	4.29	0.627	3	5
26	Promoting a fair employee rewarding system	642	4.28	0.601	2	5
26	Providing constructive feedback to staff	639	4.28	0.623	1	5
26	Managing institutional finances	669	4.28	0.616	2	5
28	Implementing new technologies	654	4.25	0.628	1	5
29	Leading, guiding, and assessing teams	669	4.21	0.598	2	5
30	Accepting criticism	644	4.17	0.656	1	5
31	Securing additional resources (e.g. grant funding, fundraising, donations, etc.)	670	4.16	0.634	3	5
32	Tending to the individual needs of teachers and other employees	637	4.12	0.615	1	5
33	Cooperating with the local community	655	4.04	0.623	2	5
34	Keeping track of the latest findings in the field of psychology and pedagogy	644	3.98	0.651	2	5
35	Calling attention to the institution in media and local community	648	3.96	0.607	1	5
36	Building successful marketing strategies	669	3.93	0.665	2	5
37	Cooperating with external stake-holders	648	3.90	0.672	2	5
38	Maintaining financial accounts	650	3.81	0.633	2	5
39	Running the administration	665	3.80	0.650	1	5
40	Involving parents in institutional activities	639	3.71	0.669	1	5

Table 1: Competences important for the job of a headteacher

The results suggest that headteachers recognize the importance of precisely those competences that are an integral part of pedagogical leadership. On the top are the competences that Male and Palaiologou (2016) claim to be characteristic of pedagogical leadership. More precisely, pedagogical leadership refers to a situation in which »pedagogically educated leaders combine their pedagogical knowledge with their managing competences when performing leadership« (Male and Palaiologou 2016, p. 4), thereby emphasizing pedagogy as »the key aspect of formal leadership where the responsibility for student learning is based on something more than the dualistic relationship between teachers and learners and an approach that includes influencing parental and local community involvement when seeking successful learning outcomes« (Male and Palaiologou 2016, p. 5). Human relationships are at the core of pedagogical work (Giles 2018) and as such represent a crucial aspect of pedagogical leadership.

In other words, pedagogical competences are recognised to be important for successful headship. Although this implies that leadership actions are not predetermined, the headteacher remains responsible for promoting a desirable school culture, particularly by establishing a safe environment and cooperation among everyone in school. This is appreciated by the headteachers who participate in focus groups, as they emphasize the ability to work with people; behave and react appropriately; communicate in a motivating manner with staff, students, and their parents; and help to resolve conflicts. This is evident in their narratives:

»The most stressful part of the job are human relations among the staff. They handle children more easily than each other. No wonder people say that it is the most difficult to work with other people. I think that that frustrates people the most. It is very important that a headteacher is a normal and well-balanced person.«

»It is essential for a headteacher to be able to deal with any situation, to discuss things with their colleagues, to be diplomatic in conflict situations, to convince local government that allocated funds are insufficient etc. A successful headteacher needs to be polite, talkative, have a strong character, computer literacy, good soul but also authority when necessary.«

»For a headteacher important are eloquence, good command of mother tongue and at least one foreign language.«

Headteachers find that the most important competence for the job is the ability to act quickly in situations of crisis. What they actually mean by this is described by the focus groups in the following manner:

- to deal with the unexpected issues (e.g. *»Teaching or technical staff comes under the influence of alcohol - you can't talk to him when he's drunk, and if you talk to him when he's sober, then it's mobbing«*).
- to perform first aid (e.g. *»A kid has an epileptic seizure«*)
- to adapt to any situation (e.g. *»Every new workday is a new adventure«*)
- to have good judgment, maturity (e.g. *»One cannot be too emotional«*)
- to learn how to cope with stress.

Headteachers perceive stress in different ways, but the biggest stressor is the uncertainty of their position and possibility of anonymous complaints filed to the educational inspection authorities. They also worry about stress-induced behavioural changes that affect the manner in which they treat their colleagues. High pressure caused by extensive reforms, communication, and relationship with different stakeholders and administrative demands are well-known stress factors in headship (Phillips and Sen 2011); in this study, these aspects are evident in headteachers' reports:

»We (the headteachers) simply burn out while being overburdened by the efforts to keep our jobs and to run school. If you want to have a good school, do projects, and be present in public, you must exhaust yourself. I underline this—you must invest a lot of effort to keep your job, starting with the politics, but also school staff, parents, etc.«

»We are under great pressure what to do next with our position—after my headteacher mandate is over, my old teaching post will be occupied, and not a day goes by that I don't think about it. Every step of the way you can get inspected and fired. You come to work every day and you should give your best under such pressure. For me, it's huge stress.«

»The problem is the fact that the inspection comes to school without having first checked the allegations; anonymous complaints can be made by anyone, for example, by a staff member who was not allowed to work extra hours.«

»There is no protection of headteachers and the profession itself. Anyone can say this and that and file a complaint for anything.«

»It bothers me a lot, it happened to me in my first year as a headteacher when I got a bunch of anonymous complaints. It creates a great stress and it changes you, you approach your colleagues differently.«

Further, headteachers also undergo stress at the beginning of a school year (September) because that is when the classes need to be set up and schedules and curriculum need to be agreed upon:

»What is problematic is the dynamics of the job, the job never ends. You cannot plan a day in advance, something always comes up. All the time my assistant and I make 'to do lists'. One must keep an eye on the contracts and keep track when each teacher's contract is expiring, when is general medical examination due, when can the school janitor go to physical examination etc. Sometimes I wake up at night and make notes in my cell phone.«

As far as professional development is concerned, headteachers recognise the need to invest effort in their own education in forms of conferences, e-education, seeking advice from outside the school (e.g. legal advice on teacher contracts), browsing through literature/books/handbooks; however, they also ask for institutional support in the first year, which corroborates the results of a study by Rogić (2017). The participants of the focus groups believe that prospective headteachers must be told in advance what to expect from the profession of a headteacher:

»He should know detailed job description, what are his rights and obligations and if the job will affect his private life. One can hardly be prepared for everything that awaits him on the job but at least he should gain an insight in all possible issues and stressful situations. There should be workshops with the 'old' headteachers where they could share their personal experiences while in service.«

»In the educational programme for headship, there should also be a practical part that would last a couple of months, at least for young teachers who are not headteachers yet.«

»Apart from education in pedagogy and psychology, there should be a programme about communication skills, managerial skills, computer skills and foreign languages. Of course there should be a bit of law and economy, depends on the type of school.«

The analysis of the narratives of the headteachers in the focus groups indicate overlaps in assessments made by headteachers in this study and the study conducted by Male and Palaiologou (2016) in English schools. The authors found similar aspects important in the occupation of being a headteacher:

- establishing a success culture,
- managing external expectations and demands,
- selecting and inducting staff,
- establishing and maintaining a robust supportive environment,
- creating and maintaining effective internal relationships,
- displaying headteacher leadership behaviour.

»Establishing positive culture and supportive environment« corresponds to a clear vision of the institution's progress and efficient problem-solving. Contributing to effective internal relationships' corresponds to building mutual trust among staff members, collaborating with educational staff, and resolving conflicts. »Headteacher behaviour that demonstrates leadership« corresponds to motivating all school staff, quick responses in crisis situations, professional self-development, and coordinating and delegating tasks. This indicates that, in spite of differences between national education systems, headteachers find the same kind of competences to be important for successful headship.

In addition, according to Kovačić et al. (2013), successful headteachers in various countries (namely, Croatia, Slovenia, Germany, USA, and Australia) share the same characteristics. They are visionaries, strategists, leaders of the educational process, organizers, administrators, and team colleagues, linking elements within the school environment. and realizers of professional and business objectives.

Competences that must be part of headteacher education

The second set of results refers to the competences that must be part of headteacher education from the perspective of headteachers (Table 2). These are also ranked to indicate the educational priorities of headteachers. The competences mentioned at the top of Table 1 are shaded.

RanK	COMPETENCE	f	%	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
1	Understanding and applying legislation	325	48.36	100	100
2	Providing rapid response to crisis situation	317	47.17	100	100
3	Creating a safe and supporting environment	311	46.27	100	100
4	Managing institutional finances	302	44.94	100	100
5	Engaging in professional self-development	297	44.19	100	100
6	Conflict resolution	296	44.04	100	100
7	Coordinating and delegating tasks	295	43.89	100	100
8	Adopting a clear vision for the institution	290	43.15	100	100
9	Securing additional resources (e.g. grant funding, fundraising, donations, etc.)	286	42.55	100	100

10	Monitoring quality of education	285	42.41	100	100
11,5	Motivating staff	279	41.51	100	100
11,5	Building mutual trust between staff members	279	41.51	100	100
13	Quick and efficient problem-solving ability	267	39.73	100	100
14	Effective (written and oral) communication	263	39.13	100	100
15	Leading, guiding, and assessing teams	246	36.60	100	100
16	Tracking changes in the education system	237	35.26	100	100
17	Managing personal resources	231	34.37	100	100
18	Collaborating with educational staff, psychologists, pedagogues, etc.	227	33.77	100	100
19	Implementing new technologies	222	33.03	100	100
20	Promoting a fair employee rewarding system	221	32.88	100	100
21	Managing resources in a rational manner	220	32.73	100	100
22	Promoting professional excellence of all staff members	216	32.14	100	100
23,5	Informed decision-making	211	31.39	100	100
23,5	Promoting responsibility among staff	209	31.11	100	100
25	Promoting co-operation between employees	209	31.11	100	100
26	Building successful marketing strategies	205	30.50	100	100
27	Maintaining financial accounts	203	30.20	100	100
28	Promoting professional development	200	29.76	100	100
29	Providing constructive feedback to staff	196	29.16	100	100
30	Setting attainable goals	194	28.86	100	100
31,5	Securing the best possible working conditions	190	28.27	100	100
31,5	Timely addressing of daily challenges in schoolwork	190	28.27	100	100
33	Accepting criticism	186	27.67	100	100
34	Keeping track of the latest findings in the field of psychology and pedagogy	179	26.63	100	100
35	Running the administration	171	25.44	100	100
36	Calling attention to the institution in media and local community	164	24.40	100	100
37,5	Cooperating with the local community	157	23.36	100	100
37,5	Tending to individual needs of teachers and other employees	157	23.36	100	100
39	Cooperating with the external stake-holders	141	20.98	100	100
40	Involving parents in institutional activities	125	18.60	100	100

Table 2: Competences that must be developed through preparation for headship

When it comes to the competences that need to be developed through education, headteachers who participated in the study emphasise the importance of several domains, including business and administration, in addition to the aforementioned pedagogical competences. This has been recognised by the participants of the focus groups when they indicated that *»the headteacher should be a pedagogue, an administrator and an economist«*. More precisely, they stated that education in the area of legal and administrative tasks as well as financial management is needed. This is evident from the following statements made by these headteachers:

»It is necessary that a headteacher knows the law and legal regulation in general and keep up with the constant changes in the school statute, the Education Act, Labour Act, Public Procurement Act, and all the rules that apply to headteachers. Headship must be conducted according to laws and legal acts brought about by the state but also by the market conditions.«

»The administrative part of headteacher education is very important because headteachers need that kind of knowledge to make correct decisions. It is important to know what is allowed to do and what is not, since the headteachers are responsible for everything and they sign everything.«

»The administrative jobs take up a lot of time (e.g. daily timesheets, student transfer, filling in various forms, signing contracts etc.). Every day I have a particular period of a day when I just sign contracts but believe me I lose a lot of time doing that.«

»A headteacher needs to know how to manage projects, coordinate them and form project teams, do administrative chores (e.g. checking timesheets); submit projects for local, national and EU funding; browse the Internet and find calls to apply to.«

»I spend the greatest amount of time on running of projects because the entire responsibility lies on the headteacher—whether he will gain the funds, allocate them correctly, motivate teachers to do their part, which is very difficult.«

»It is important to add that all schools in the country do not meet the same standards. There is a lot of talks about equal conditions, but I do not believe they are achieved. And that's the problem since it is one thing to run a school in one part of the country and in another. I'm in contact with my colleagues. Take preparations for student knowledge competitions. I report to my colleague that I don't know how to finance Gastro competition, which involves an increasing number of students and teachers every year, and she says that she is getting three-thousand euros from the local government and doesn't know how to spend it. I don't think she is more successful than us, but they have the money and can give it to the school. In other areas of the country, there is no such support and it affects our work, and that is why it is important for a headteacher to be prepared to secure additional funding.«

Further, the implication of additional education is explained by the focus groups in the following manner:

»Additional education should cover the following topics: culture of speaking and writing, fiscal responsibility, control and financial planning, issues regarding Labour Act, how to be a good organiser, how to understand the budget and how to balance resources.«

Headteachers are also convinced that education/professional development is necessary, but the majority suggests there must be modules so that everyone can opt these for as a part of a program that he/she misses.

»I think that a headteacher must have some sort of formal education at the beginning. That is something that took us years of informal learning. It would be easier for him to do that part at the very start of the mandate—management, finances, communication skills, legislative and everything he needs for the job.«

When Tables 1 and 2 are compared, multiple overlaps become evident. The responses of the headteachers reveal that six out of the top ten competences could and should be developed through education as part of preparation for the profession. This confirms that headteachers have certain expectations from educational programs which are supposed to provide support for the development of professional competences within the scope of formal education. Because of the challenges that headteachers face in the process of improving school effectiveness, there must be high-quality preparation for the role of a headteacher (Podgornik and Vogrinc 2017).

Data collected from the focus groups also support the fact that headteachers of different profiles are aware of the importance of professional education. All participants stated that additional education is essential for the job of a headteacher, particularly because most headteachers at the beginning of their career lack the skills in economy and business as well as administration and legislation. In addition, they recognise the need for professionalization of the headship and the dominant role of formal education.

»It is important to make it obligatory so that the local 'sheriffs' could not find faults with candidates that are very good at their job and full of virtues. It should be organised as formal education by the universities or government agencies.«

»We are supposed to get education here and abroad. Unfortunately, a large number of colleagues do not take the opportunity but run from it. We talk about headteacher competences, but some headteachers do not want those competences since they do not wish to learn. That is because such situation is not regulated. I am all for regulation and there should be obligatory forms of education for each headteacher. When you finish a program at the university, you get a diploma—the same should be applied here. There must be certificates that confirm that someone is allowed to be a headteacher and not that they decide it for themselves.«

Headteachers that went through the »learning by doing« process have the need to share their experience and, according to Damiani et al. (2017), their narratives can naturally inform the preparation of pedagogical leadership across international borders. In other words, their opinion is of significance and must be taken into account when it comes to the most important competences for a successful school leadership, since they speak from experience. The issues they report reveal how they handle each situation and do not prove that headteachers develop a consistent model of pedagogical leadership in school.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the opinion of Croatian in-service headteachers with regard to the competences necessary in the profession and the competences that they believed must be developed through education. In order to determine this, focus group discussions and an online survey were conducted. The opinion of 720 headteachers was analysed and the competences were ranked in order of their preference.

It can be concluded that the list of the most important competences for the headship includes the following aspects: providing rapid response to crises situation, building mutual trust among staff members; creating a safe and supportive environment; engaging in professional self-development; adopting a clear vision for the institution; quick and efficient problem-solving ability; motivating staff; conflict resolution; collaborating with educational staff, psychologists, pedagogues etc.; coordinating and delegating tasks.

In addition, headteachers believe that the following top 10 competences must be developed through education as preparation for headship: understanding and applying legislation; providing rapid response to crises situations; creating a safe and supportive environment; managing institutional finances; engaging in professional self-development; conflict resolution; coordinating and delegating tasks; adopting a clear vision for the institution; securing additional resources (e.g. grant funding, fundraising, donations, etc.); and monitoring the quality of education.

Both lists indicate that the headteachers recognise the importance of those competences that are significant for school leaders who practice pedagogical leadership. Pedagogical leadership represents the contemporary face of school leadership and it can considerably contribute to school improvement when school reform is undertaken, such as is currently underway in Croatia.

Although this study exhibits certain limitations, due to the fact that it relies solely on headteachers' assessment of competences, it serves as a good starting point for further research, which might include the perspectives of parents or teacher. Therefore, the current findings suggest that the opinion of headteachers is rather recommendable, but this does not imply that they already employ the listed competence. Theoretically, pedagogical leadership is a topic that requires more exploration in the Croatian context. In practice, the next step towards the professionalization of the headteacher profession is to design education programmes which would enable them to gain necessary competences and to make these programmes obligatory prior to becoming a headteacher.

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BITI VPLIVEN PEDAGOŠKI VODJA: RAVNATELJEV POGLED NA POTREBNE KOMPETENCE

Povzetek: Raziskovalni članek se osredotoča na cilj določiti kompetence, ki so potrebne za uspešno kariero ravnateljev na hrvaških šolah in katere od njih se lahko razvijejo z izobraževanjem. Pedagoško vodstvo obsega upravno, vodstveno in predvsem pedagoško vrsto kompetenc. Direktorji, ki izvajajo pedagoško vodstvo, dajejo poudarek ustvarjanju šolskega okolja, ki podpira učenje učencev na učinkovitejši način. V razpravah fokusnih skupin in spletni anketi je sodelovalo 720 ravnateljev, njihovi odzivi pa so bili analizirani, da so dobili seznam kompetenc ravnateljev. Posebna pozornost je bila namenjena tistim kompetencam, ki jih je mogoče razviti z izobraževanjem. Fokusne skupine so poudarile pričakovanja ravnateljev od začetne priprave na vodilno vlogo. Ugotovitve kažejo, da najpomembnejše kompetence, ki so potrebne za vodenje šole, ocenjujejo ravnatelji, ustrezajo pedagoški kakovosti vodenja (v nasprotju z administrativnimi ali vodstvenimi kompetencami): vzpostavljanje medsebojnega zaupanja med uslužbenci, ustvarjanje varnega in podpornega okolja, vključevanje v poklicno samo-razvoj, sprejetje jasne vizije zavoda, hitro in učinkovito reševanje problemov, motiviranje osebja, reševanje konfliktov, sodelovanje z izobraževalnim osebjem itd. Po mnenju ravnateljev se lahko podoben nabor kompetenc razvije z začetnim izobraževanjem, zato bi ga morali se izvajajo v izobraževalnem programu, ki bi voditeljem omogočil, da razvijejo točno tiste kompetence, za katere menijo, da bi jim pomagale bolj učinkovito opravljati svoje delo.

Ključne besede: kompetence, ravnatelj, mešana metodologija, pedagoško vodstvo, šola

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