

Career Advancement of Teachers in Primary Education – Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Professional Development in the Republic of Croatia

Abstract: *Teachers' professional development is one of the key factors contributing to the quality of the educational process, while opportunities for career advancement provide an important incentive for their continuous professional improvement and competence development. This paper examines the system of career advancement for teachers in primary education, with particular emphasis on the challenges teachers face in pursuing their professional development. It analyses opportunities for advancement, criteria for evaluating professional performance, and the role of professional development, mentoring, and support provided by educational institutions in developing teachers' competencies. Particular attention is devoted to administrative burdens, access to professional development opportunities, teacher motivation, and the transparency and fairness of promotion procedures. The paper highlights the need for a more systematic approach to professional development that would more closely link teachers' career advancement to their actual needs, the quality of their work, and their contribution to school development. Potential improvements include more flexible forms of professional development, higher-quality mentoring, continuous monitoring of professional growth, and the establishment of a more supportive and equitable promotion system. The aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the importance of teachers' professional development and to identify opportunities for improving the existing mechanisms of career advancement in primary education in the Republic of Croatia.*

Keywords: *teachers, basic education, professional development, advancement, professional training, teacher competencies, lifelong learning*

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary education system, teachers are no longer merely transmitters of knowledge but active participants in creating a supportive learning environment. Changes in society, the development of digital technologies, diverse student needs, and new pedagogical and methodological insights require teachers to engage in continuous professional development and to remain prepared to adapt to new circumstances.

Teachers' professional development therefore represents a continuous process extending throughout their entire professional career. It encompasses the acquisition and enhancement of professional, pedagogical, didactic, methodological, and other competencies required for the effective delivery of education. Various forms of professional development, the exchange of experiences with colleagues, participation in projects and professional activities, as well as a promotion system that enables formal recognition of teachers' professional growth and contribution to the work and development of the school, all play an important role in this process.

The career advancement process may be accompanied by various challenges, including administrative burdens, a lack of time and resources for professional development, limited access to different forms of training, and concerns regarding the transparency and objectivity of evaluation criteria. These challenges may affect teachers' motivation and their willingness to continuously invest in their own professional development.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHERS

The professional development and career advancement of teachers in the Republic of Croatia are regulated by the *Ordinance on the Advancement of Teachers, Subject Teachers, Professional Associates and Principals in Primary and Secondary Schools and Student Dormitories*.

"The professional development of teachers in primary education is a continuous process of lifelong learning. It includes professional training, participation in professional councils, the implementation of new practices, and advancement to the professional titles of mentor, advisor, or excellent advisor, to improve the quality of teaching and student achievement." (Official Gazette 68/2019)

As stipulated by the Ordinance, a teacher may be promoted to the professional title of mentor, advisor, or excellent advisor for a period of five years, subject to obtaining the required number of points. There is also the possibility of obtaining a permanent professional title. This applies to teachers who have been appointed to the title of excellent advisor three times, as well as to those who have more than 30 years of experience in education. However, these two provisions are not fully consistent. Namely, a teacher appointed to the title of excellent advisor three times must have previously been appointed to a professional

title at least twice, whereas a teacher with 30 years of experience in education may have been promoted only to the title of mentor.

Teachers' professional development is a fundamental prerequisite for improving the quality of educational work and responding successfully to the changes that characterise contemporary education. In the Croatian education system, professional development is closely associated with lifelong learning and competence development.

It is important to distinguish between the individual and organisational dimensions of professional development. At the individual level, teachers identify their own needs, set professional goals, monitor the outcomes of their work, and select appropriate forms of professional development. At the organisational level, schools should create conditions in which professional learning becomes an integral part of everyday work. Such an approach makes it possible to align teachers' individual professional goals with the developmental goals of the school.

The development of teacher competencies occupies a central place in professional development. These competencies encompass a range of interconnected dimensions, including subject-specific, pedagogical, didactic and methodological, communication, social, digital, and organisational competencies.

Contemporary primary education is based on inclusive, student-centred education. For this reason, teachers need to develop the competencies required to individualise teaching, encourage students' active participation, and create a supportive and safe classroom environment. The ability to conduct assessment and self-evaluation is equally important, as it enables teachers to use feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practices and plan their improvement. The active use of digital technologies for the purpose of enhancing pedagogical work should also be emphasised. Ultimately, competencies should be linked to teachers' specific needs and to the challenges they encounter in their everyday work.

Lifelong learning constitutes the foundation of contemporary teacher professional development. Today, more than ever, there is a growing need for the continuous renewal and expansion of professional knowledge. Teachers therefore cannot regard their education as complete upon obtaining a formal qualification; rather, they must strive to develop new competencies and adapt to changes in the educational environment.

Professional development can be pursued through various formal and informal forms of learning. These include seminars, workshops, professional meetings, conferences, training programmes, professional literature, professional working groups, collaborative learning, mentoring, and the exchange of experiences with colleagues. Particular value lies in forms of professional development that enable theoretical knowledge to be connected with concrete examples from teaching practice.

Teachers themselves undoubtedly bear considerable personal responsibility for their own professional development; however, the quality of this process also largely depends on the support they receive within the school. School principals play an important role in this respect, as they should encourage teachers to participate in professional development

activities, provide conditions for collaborative learning, and align employees' professional goals with the school's developmental priorities. A school that promotes open communication, collegial support, collaborative problem-solving, and the exchange of examples of good practice creates more favourable conditions for the professional development of all its employees.

CHALLENGES IN THE TEACHER CAREER ADVANCEMENT SYSTEM

The possibility of advancement to higher professional titles provides teachers with recognition for their professional work. However, the career advancement system faces a number of challenges that may affect both its effectiveness and teachers' motivation.

According to research conducted by Croatian trade unions in primary education, only one in seven primary school teachers advances to a higher professional title. Why is this the case? The answer lies partly in a lack of time and motivation, but particular emphasis should also be placed on the complexity and administrative burden of the advancement procedure. A teacher seeking advancement must collect and document various forms of professional work, participation in training programmes, projects, workshops, and other activities. Although documenting professional work serves a legitimate purpose, excessive administrative requirements may reduce the amount of time teachers can devote to direct work with students and lesson preparation. Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between the effective evaluation of teachers' work and the simplicity of the advancement procedure itself.

According to a study on teachers' satisfaction with career advancement in primary schools, conducted by K. Zlatović and T. Vidić on a sample of 673 teachers from across the Republic of Croatia, only one quarter of the participants were satisfied with the opportunities for advancement, while the majority were dissatisfied with the advancement criteria prescribed by the Ordinance on the Advancement of Teachers, Subject Teachers, Professional Associates and Principals in Primary and Secondary Schools and Student Dormitories (2019, 2020, 2021). Furthermore, the study showed that teachers were dissatisfied with the benefits associated with advancement, their salaries, the level of autonomy in their work, and, more generally, their professional status within the school community and society.

This study provides important insight into teachers' perceptions of the career advancement system in primary schools and highlights the specific challenges they face in their professional development.

Another study was conducted by Irena Klasnić, Marina Đuranović, and Tomislava Vidić with the aim of examining the expertise of teachers who had advanced to higher professional titles. The results showed that there are numerous, previously mentioned, challenges related to career advancement and that expert teachers are often underutilised within the education system. The potential and expertise of these teachers are only rarely

used, mainly to support trainee teachers or in situations where their expertise is recognised within a relatively limited professional circle.

Unequal opportunities to participate in training programmes, professional conferences, projects, and other activities that may contribute to career advancement may also represent a particular challenge for teachers. Access to such activities may be affected by the school's financial resources, geographical distance, the organisation of working hours, the availability of substitute teachers, and opportunities to participate in international or interinstitutional projects.

Another significant issue is the workload associated with teachers' regular professional duties. In addition to direct educational work, contemporary teachers perform numerous administrative, organisational, and other tasks. Under such conditions, the additional time required for training programmes, professional projects, research, writing professional papers, or other activities related to career advancement may represent a considerable burden.

Teachers also often question the objectivity of the system used to evaluate individual activities, which may further affect their motivation. The career advancement system should aim to recognise different forms of professional contribution rather than favouring only certain types of activities.

In conclusion, a wide range of challenges may adversely affect teachers' motivation to pursue advancement to higher professional titles, including a lack of time, administrative burden, unequal opportunities for timely professional development, limited financial resources, and concerns regarding the objectivity of the evaluation system.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT SYSTEM

Improving the professional development of teachers represents one of the important areas for enhancing the quality of the education system. Professional development should not be viewed solely as the fulfilment of requirements for advancement to higher professional titles, but rather as a continuous process through which teachers develop their knowledge, skills, and competencies in accordance with changes in education and the needs of students. Therefore, the existing career advancement system should be more closely linked to opportunities for continuous professional learning and the development of teacher competencies.

In addition to formal professional development, greater emphasis could be placed on innovation in the teaching process, the development and application of contemporary teaching methods, the preparation of teaching materials, participation in projects, the exchange of examples of good practice, and contributions to the development of the school and the professional community. In this way, career advancement would be more closely associated with teachers' actual professional practice and less with the formal fulfilment

of individual requirements. Serious consideration should also be given to providing fairer financial rewards for teachers who have advanced to one of the previously mentioned professional titles—mentor, advisor, or excellent advisor—by increasing the differences in salary coefficients and remuneration.

An important opportunity also lies in the individualisation of professional development. Teachers differ in terms of experience, field of work, interests, and the level of development of specific competencies, which means that a uniform approach to professional development cannot respond equally well to their individual needs. Professional development could therefore be based on individual development plans in which teachers, in cooperation with the school and professional associates, define the areas in which they wish to improve their competencies. Such an approach would make it possible to connect professional development activities with the specific needs of each individual.

Rather than focusing exclusively on the number of completed training programmes, greater emphasis could be placed on the outcomes of professional development and its impact on teachers' professional practice. Such an approach would help ensure that professional development is not merely a formal element of the career advancement system, but a genuine instrument of professional growth.

Successful professional development also requires appropriate support at both the school and education-system levels. Expectations that teachers continuously invest in their own professional development should be accompanied by the provision of adequate time, financial resources, and organisational conditions for professional learning. Schools should play a more active role in identifying the developmental needs of their employees and creating conditions for addressing them. It is also important to develop a culture of feedback in which teachers' professional development is continuously monitored and guided, rather than assessed only within the formal career advancement procedure.

The career advancement system should create a motivating environment for teachers in which advancement is not merely an administrative means of attaining a particular status, but an incentive for continuous learning and for the ongoing development and innovation of the teacher's professional role.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' professional development represents one of the key factors influencing the quality of the education system, while the teacher career advancement system is an important mechanism through which their professional development can be encouraged, recognised, and evaluated. For this reason, teachers' professional development should be regarded as a continuous process that extends throughout their entire professional career. Advancement to higher professional titles can perform an important motivational and developmental function. It enables teachers' professional work, expertise, experience, and contribution to the quality of the educational process to be formally recognised. However, the analysis of

the challenges discussed in this paper indicates that these factors can easily reduce teachers' motivation to engage in additional activities and professional development.

Therefore, the existing career advancement system should be continuously developed and adapted to the needs of teachers and the education system. It is particularly important to link professional development with teachers' individual needs. Above all, favourable conditions should be created in which teachers can readily connect their own learning and professional progress with the specific needs they encounter in practice.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that improving the system of teacher career advancement and professional development is a long-term process that requires cooperation among all stakeholders in the education system. The aim of such a process is not merely to increase the number of teachers advancing to higher professional titles, but to build a system in which career advancement represents a natural continuation of professional development and an incentive for further learning and improvement of teaching practice. Investment in teachers' professional development is, at the same time, an investment in the quality of schools and in students' education.

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Karijerno napredovanje nastavnika u osnovnom obrazovanju – izazovi i mogućnosti unaprjeđenja profesionalnog razvoja

Apstrakt: Profesionalni razvoj nastavnika jedan je od ključnih čimbenika kvalitete odgojno-obrazovnog procesa, a mogućnosti napredovanja predstavljaju važan poticaj za njihovo kontinuirano usavršavanje i razvoj kompetencija. U radu se razmatra sustav napredovanja nastavnika u osnovnom obrazovanju, s posebnim naglaskom na izazove s kojima se nastavnici susreću tijekom ostvarivanja profesionalnog razvoja. Analiziraju se mogućnosti napredovanja, kriteriji vrednovanja profesionalnog rada te uloga stručnog usavršavanja, mentorstva i podrške odgojno-obrazovnih ustanova u razvoju nastavničkih kompetencija. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje administrativnim opterećenjima, dostupnosti stručnog usavršavanja, motivaciji nastavnika te transparentnosti i pravednosti postupaka napredovanja. U radu se ističe potreba za sustavnijim pristupom profesionalnom razvoju koji bi napredovanje nastavnika više povezao s njihovim stvarnim potrebama, kvalitetom rada i doprinosom razvoju škole. Kao mogućnosti unaprjeđenja predlažu se fleksibilniji oblici stručnog usavršavanja, kvalitetnije mentorstvo, kontinuirano praćenje profesionalnog razvoja te stvaranje poticajnijeg i pravednijeg sustava napredovanja. Cilj rada je pridonijeti razumijevanju važnosti profesionalnog razvoja nastavnika te ukazati na mogućnosti unaprjeđenja postojećih mehanizama napredovanja u osnovnom obrazovanju u Republici Hrvatskoj.

Ključne riječi: nastavnici, osnovno obrazovanje, profesionalni razvoj, napredovanje, stručno usavršavanje, nastavničke kompetencije, cjeloživotno učenje