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## Headteachers' Networks for Leadership Development

Mreže ravnateljev za razvoj vodenja

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## *Headteachers' Networks for Leadership Development*

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## Abstract

*The National School for Leadership in Education, a unit within the National Education Institute of Slovenia, designed the Headteachers' Networks for Leadership Development Programme in 2009. Since then, some three hundred experienced headteachers from kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools, have taken part in this one-year professional development programme. The Programme is based on three principles: networking, peer counselling, and self-reflection on leadership. Qualitative research on the development of leadership competencies was conducted in the year 2021. The data provided by the participants was gathered by way of a questionnaire, while the facilitators submitted written reports after each network meeting, elaborating on topics related to educators (including the headteacher), teaching and learning, cooperation with the environment, and resources.*

**Key words:** *leadership | professional development | headteachers' networks | peer learning | peer counselling | self-reflection*

## Mreže ravnateljev za razvoj vodenja

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## Povzetek

Šola za ravnatelje deluje kot enota Zavoda RS za šolstvo. Od kar je leta 2009 zasnovala program Mreže ravnateljev za razvoj vodenja, se je tega enoletnega programa strokovnega usposabljanja udeležilo približno tristo izkušenih ravnateljev vrtcev, osnovnih in srednjih šol. Program temelji na treh načelih: mreženje, medsebojno svetovanje in samorefleksija o vodenju. Leta 2021 je bila izvedena kvalitativna raziskava o razvoju vodstvenih kompetenc. Podatki, ki so jih posredovali udeleženci, so bili zbrani z vprašalnikom, medtem ko so moderatorji po vsakem srečanju mreže predložili pisna poročila, v katerih so obdelali teme, povezane z vzgojitelji oz. učitelji (vključno z ravnatelji), poučevanjem in učenjem ter sodelovanjem z okoljem in viri.

**Ključne besede:** vodenje | profesionalni razvoj | mreže ravnateljev | kolegialno učenje | kolegialno svetovanje | samorefleksija

## Introduction

The National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE) was established in 1995 by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia to provide for training and the professional development of (aspiring) headteachers. It has been the central public institution responsible for the education and training of headteachers and other school leaders. In 2021, the Government altered the status of NSLE, organising it as a unit within the National Education Institute of Slovenia (NEI).

NSLE takes care of the professional development of headteachers. Over the years it has established a “*system of lifelong learning of headteachers*” that provides for various forms of headteachers’ professional development in different stages/periods of school leadership. Internal analyses regarding headteachers’ participation in various forms and activities of lifelong learning show that more than 87% of Slovenian headteachers participate in one of the forms of professional development provided by the NSLE at least once a year (Zavašnik Arčnik et al. 2014). The data corresponds with the TALIS 2018 survey (Japelj Pavešić et al. 2020).

The NSLE implements numerous programmes and other types of life-long learning support for all periods of headship:

- induction (pre-service): headship licence; obligatory; 1 year
- initial: mentoring newly appointed headteachers; optional; 1 year
- in-service: annual conferences; **headteachers’ networks for leadership development**; counselling; coaching; thematic seminars; middle leadership programme; school self-evaluation programme, etc. (Zavašnik Arčnik et al. 2014; Brejc and Ažman 2021)

Various kinds of learning activities for headteachers and other school leaders are aimed at:

- learning and teaching processes and student achievement, since schools cannot change and improve unless they change classroom work at its core;
- implementing the whole school approach and assuming responsibility for quality by all stakeholders;
- fostering a school culture favourable to learning at all levels, as well as to introducing change, constant monitoring and self-evaluation of work and the use of data;

- supporting distributed/collaborative leadership; and
- recognising the importance of considering the specifics of each school. (Koren and Brejc 2020)

Among the most important NSLE strengths are trust and close relationships between its staff and headteachers, imbedded in the inclusion of headteachers in its activities as trainers, mentors, peer counsellors, external evaluators, (co)authors of papers, monographs and publications, Journal Editorial board members, etc.

In Slovenia, headteachers exercise pedagogical leadership as well as manage their school. They are autonomous in their selection of staff, managing finances, purchasing equipment, designing the content of the elective part of the school programme, organising school work, ensuring the quality of educational processes and facilitating their school's cooperation with the environment. The Slovenian headteachers' context is very specific in terms of their selection and appointment, with teachers exercising a strong influence. Headteachers are appointed for the term of five years only, but they may be reappointed. Their appointment and dismissal is in the hands of the school council, which is obliged to acquire separate approvals beforehand by the teaching staff, the local community, and the Minister of Education. (Koren and Brejc 2020)

## Theoretical background

Vast research and school practice prove that headteachers' care for their own professional and career development and that of their teachers are the main levers of the quality work of educational institutions. The TALIS 2018 survey (Japelj Pavešić et al. 2020) emphasises that professional development activities prove to be an essential condition for establishing a culture of continuous improvement and a shared learning vision between teachers and school leadership. Headteachers should not only provide opportunities for participation in professional development activities but also participate in them themselves, to strengthen their administrative-legal and organisational skills, and manage their headteacher skills (Sparks 2002; Zepeda, Parylo and Bengtson 2013; OECD 2016). Furthermore, professional development activities are the cornerstone of any successfully implemented major education reform in OECD countries (Schleicher 2015). Professional development activities help teachers and headteachers to acquire the necessary

competencies related to being informed and accepting policy efforts critically (Kennedy 2005). Recent policy reviews have identified professional development activities as a key advantage of the most successful education systems (Davis et al. 2020; Darling-Hammond 2017; Jensen et al. 2016).

The thematic working group of the Education and training programme (European Commission 2020), which deals with the education and training of leaders and other professionals in education and training, has formulated starting points and guidelines for the professional learning of school leaders: (a) professional learning is a right and a professional responsibility, (b) it must be organised in groups that allow interaction, (c) it must be in accordance with the development needs of the individual leader and the educational institution, (d) it must be based on critical (self-)reflection of one's own management, the practice and operation of the educational institution, and (e) aimed at improving the educational institution.

Similarly, other research also proves that effective lifelong learning programmes for leadership in education and training are exploratory (e.g. action research), experiential (e.g. shadowing) and reflection-oriented (e.g. self-evaluation, diary); they enable contact with the workplace (shadowing, practice), are based on collaboration (mentoring, coaching, networking, study groups, peer learning), use diverse learning and teaching methods, and balance theory and practice (see e.g. Kontautiene and Melnikova 2008). New models of learning and education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are increasingly based on collaboration and networking (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman and West 2011). The goals of networking as a form of professional learning and development are: to share experiences among experienced headteachers; to disseminate examples of good practice; to help and provide advice; to strengthen personal and collective capabilities; to reduce institutional polarisation and competitiveness; to share personnel resources; to foster innovation (“together we can do more”); to increase efficiency (as networking allows us to achieve goals that would otherwise be very difficult to achieve individually) (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, West 2011).

According to Davies et al. (2020), the five validation criteria for any professional learning for headteachers to be effective are that it should:

- individualise the headteacher's learning by considering his/her context, needs and details of his institution;
- take place mostly at the headteacher's workplace and be carried out on a regular basis (not only occasionally);

- be a collaborative process that includes (peer) counselling and problem solving;
- be reflective and based on actual needs and experiences, appealing to the students' attitudes/beliefs and raising awareness of the headteacher's context; and
- be supported (if possible) by regular coaching or mentoring with the help of an external professional.

In recent years, the research into the needs of experienced Slovenian headteachers has confirmed the aforementioned trends. The headteachers stated that they needed diverse forms of education in order to grow and develop professionally. In addition to extensive attendance of conferences and consultations mainly aimed at the dissemination of information, they emphasised their need for extensive and longer lasting programmes that would enable them to be better supported in solving individual challenges. Every headteacher sometimes feels isolated in his/her role and wishes to share the weight of responsibility for difficult decisions with another competent professional. (Brejč, Zavašnik, Mlekuž 2022)

## Headteachers' Networks for Leadership Development Programme (HN Programme)

This form of support was introduced in the school year 2009/2010. Every year one group of around 30 headteachers has enrolled in the Programme. Since then 300 headteachers from kindergartens (54), primary schools (151), secondary schools (50), dormitories and special needs education institutions (12 in total) took part in the Programme.

### Starting point

The Headteachers' Networks for Leadership Development Programme was designed in accordance with modern principles, for already experienced headteachers. It is based on three theoretical principles typical for the contemporary learning of (experienced) headteachers: networking, peer counselling, and self-reflection.

1. *Networking.* Research proves (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, West 2011) that a moderator (broker) who leads, directs and monitors the network is crucial for successful networking. Networking is not a goal in itself, it is only a means that allows us to achieve the goal; the actual goal is an enriched learning environment for teachers and children (Hopkins 2005). The effects of networking are diverse and can be identified at four levels. On the first level, acquaintances and casual contacts are in the foreground; on the second level, members build relationships, get to know each other and exchange experiences; on the third level, they cooperate in solving challenges; and on the fourth and highest level, networking is characterised by joint work, co-responsibility, interdependence, and permanent collaboration (Muijs, Ainschow, Chapman, West 2011). With the HN Programme, we aim to reach the third and the fourth level of networking.
2. *Peer counselling.* Peer counselling is a form of professional development during which headteachers advise each other, exchange good practice, encourage cooperation and support, and help each other to find the best solutions. In practice, this means that several headteachers thinking about their work meet and talk about their leadership practices, thus improving them. It is important that they trust each other, as it is about sharing good practice as well as discovering and solving leadership problems or challenges. Well-conceived and well executed mutual counselling brings benefits on many levels. Its advantages can be summarised as follows: better cooperation and generation of new networks, as most of the headteacher's work is done in isolation; boosted reflection on leadership practices and thereto related analysis; provision and reception of leadership feedback; improvements to or positive changes of leadership practices. (Ažman, Gradišnik 2013).
3. *Self-reflection.* The first definition of reflection was contributed by Dewey (1933 in Mezirow 1991; Rogers 2002), who emphasised that reflection is a key process of deep learning. It is the process of critically evaluating content, our efforts, and/or our assumptions about them in order to explain the experience and give it meaning. The headteacher sheds light on their experiences through reflection and assesses the quality of their work from a critical distance. He can improve his insight into the work of the school he leads as well as into his own practice by determining what his leadership competencies are and by strengthening them. Self-reflection is the first step to getting to know yourself and your work. MacBeath



(1999) argues that in teaching and many other professions, a commitment to critical and systematic reflection on one's practice is at the heart of what it means to 'be a professional'.

In the Programme, we considered the elements of innovative learning environments (OECD 2013): incorporating advanced principles of learning and teaching, the focus on the student and thus on modern pedagogy, the strengthening of competencies, as well as on the care for educators, and various resources.

## Aim, goals and structure of the Programme

The purpose of the HN Programme was to critically shed light on existing leadership practices and develop new approaches, enabling effective leadership for learning. With it, we wanted to support the professional development of headteachers and strengthen networking among them.

The Programme was aimed at:

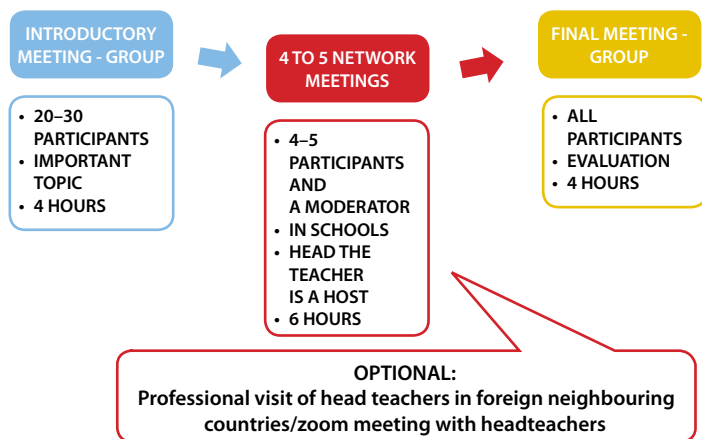
- encouraging networking of headteachers to strengthen leadership;
- facilitating the exchange of examples of good practice;
- solving current leadership challenges;
- strengthening professional discussions and (self-)reflection on one's own work; and
- the publication and presentation of examples of good practice (learning community).

The main goals were to:

- self-evaluate leadership and improve leadership practices;
- apply critical mutual assessment of leadership practices;
- exchange good practices in the field of leadership;
- network and exchange experiences;
- empower headteachers to act in certain situations; and
- strengthen sustainable networking and cooperation.

## Structure

The HN Programme was intended for experienced headteachers (after the first five-year term) from kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, music schools, and boarding schools. It was designed in the form of peer learning and counselling in small groups (networks) of headteachers with different backgrounds. As a rule, each network includes four to five headteachers meeting alternately during the year in the institutions they come from, giving each other an opportunity to learn about different leadership practices in real life situations and in an authentic work environment. Leadership and all its various images, loops and puzzles are the common thread of professional discussions at the network's meetings facilitated by a NSLE lecturer. Headteachers reflect on leadership, discuss and evaluate it by highlighting the practices in each institution, presenting examples of good practice, and solving current challenges at hand. Mutual trust and open communication in each group fostered from the initial meeting allows the members to openly present problems as well as good leadership experiences. The one-year Programme consists of 32 compulsory hours and 16 optional hours per participant spanning six meetings: two joint meetings of the main group (the introductory and the conclusion meeting) and four meetings of each of the eight subgroups – networks (picture below).



Picture: The structure of the HN Programme

Over the course of ten years, we supplemented the Programme and changed certain parts, depending on the circumstances and needs of the headteachers. For example: from 2009 to 2017, the Programme consisted of 10 meetings (four more than usual). In that extra time, the headteachers carried out

project work in groups according to challenges they chose, and an article was then published in our leadership magazine. As the social circumstances burdened by the COVID-19 pandemic commanded headteachers to invest additional effort and put in extra hours at work, we reduced the number of Programme hours, dropping the project work. In 2018, we had added optional content to the Programme: the possibility of headteachers' visiting neighbouring countries, but we could only carry it out for one year, due to the subsequent COVID-19 measures; however, in the COVID-19 period we did manage to enrich the Programme with online meetings with Slovenian headteachers running schools abroad. During the lockdown, we partially implemented the Program online, which proved to be a very good support for headteachers in those challenging times.

Each network of four to five headteachers is facilitated by a NSLE lecturer in charge of:

- coordination of dates of network meetings;
- assistance to the host in preparing the meeting at the hosting institution (programme, invitation, notification);
- participation in network meetings;
- facilitating a particular network meeting (scenario);
- evaluation of the network meeting;
- coordination of work with other facilitators;
- monitoring the work dynamics and networking effects; and
- Programme co-design, monitoring and evaluation.

The network meetings are held at the kindergartens and schools with the headteachers playing a role of either the host in the Programme (once) or participant in the exchange of experiences and in the critical reflection of the leadership of the host headteacher concerned. The meeting intended for mutual counselling follows Kolb's learning cycle (1984): the host headteacher shares his/her experiences, chooses one of them as an example of good practice, and also a challenge, and with the help of the group, makes a reflection during the meeting. He/she makes sense of the experience already at the meeting itself, both orally and with the help of diary entries.

The duties of the headteacher hosting a network meeting are to:

- take care of the organisation and leadership of the work meeting at the institution;

- present the history of his/her leadership in the school and make a self-evaluation of the results/impact;
- present the school's three best achievements;
- present an example of good leadership practice; and
- present a leadership challenge and actively seek solutions.

The tasks of the headteachers acting as participants at a network meeting are to share their experiences on the presented topics with the host, take an active part in solving the host's challenge, and be a critical friend to the host.

Finally, the expected results of the Programme are a set of examples of good leadership practices (published in an e-book); and a set of challenges headteachers face in their leadership. We expect that each headteacher will record observations in a personal diary and, based on the notes, at the end of the Programme, reflect on their learning during the Programme (Ažman, Zavašnik 2020). After completing the Programme, the participants receive a formal certificate of having completed the Programme.

## **Research, evaluation and results**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to provide an in-depth evaluation of the Programme implemented in 2020/2021 (Avguštin, Ažman 2021). The results were compared and supplemented with evaluations from previous years (Ažman, Avguštin 2020; Ažman 2019). The data was collected by way of a questionnaire and structured written reports of the moderators.

Questionnaire. At the end of the Programme, coinciding with the end of June 2021, an on-line questionnaire was sent to 36 participating headteachers, and 25 headteachers responded in the time designated. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions. As to the question of how much they strengthened their leadership competencies in the HN Programme, the answers spanned a four-point scale ranging from zero (1), partly (2), quite a lot (3) to very much (4). The detailed results are shown in the table below.

Table 1: Level of strengthening leadership competencies

	Zero	Partly	Quite a lot	Very much	Sum	Mean	Standard deviation
In the HN Programme, I strengthened my leadership competencies...	f	0	0	4	20	<b>3.9</b>	0.44
	%	0	0	16	80		
by sharing examples of good practice	f	0	0	4	20	<b>3.9</b>	0.44
	%	0	0	16	80		
through discussions on current issues	f	0	3	2	19	<b>3.7</b>	0.74
	%	0	12	8	76		
by solving leadership challenges	f	0	3	6	15	<b>3.6</b>	0.77
	%	0	12	24	60		
through self-reflection of one's own work/ leadership (presentation of the history, path and results of leadership, diary)	f	0	3	7	14	<b>3.5</b>	0.77
	%	0	12	28	56		
through networking							

The mean score of all answers was high, 3.7, with a standard deviation between 0.4 and 0.8. The most highly ranked are the activities of sharing examples of good practice and discussions on current issues (3.9), followed by solving leadership challenges (3.7), self-reflection of one's own work/ leadership (3.6) and networking (3.5).

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were expected to answer an open question: *Please highlight one of the insights regarding your leadership you gained in the past year (use notes, journal)*. Typical statements clearly showing how the Programme helped headteachers to strengthen their leadership role include:

- a) *Each of us has something to be proud of and was faced with a challenge.*
- b) *Until my colleagues' visit, I didn't have the feeling that we were working hard, I didn't notice the achievements; now I notice our progress more.*
- c) *The different approaches taken by the headteachers lead to the same goals, but what works in one school does not necessarily mean that it will also work in ours.*
- d) *Managing and working with people (teachers) is very demanding and responsible.*
- e) *I still have room for improvement and change in my leadership.*
- f) *It is important that you also love yourself, not just your colleagues.*
- g) *I want to strengthen the delegation of tasks.*
- h) *I have to think about myself; because I accept all tasks with enthusiasm, I have to slow down, otherwise I go ahead too enthusiastically.*
- i) *Sometimes you have to take time to think, consult with others, and then decide.*

The headteachers' statements confirm that the Programme goals were achieved: the principals have become more aware of their own leadership qualities (statements a, b), of the importance of the school context for their leadership style (statement c), that leading colleagues is a challenging task (statement d) and that they can still improve their leadership (statement e). The comments also confirm that some headteachers have decided to change their leadership activities in the direction of better care for their work-life balance (statement f), to strengthen the delegation of tasks (statement g), to slow down the introduction of changes (statement h) and to consult before taking decisions (statement i).

**Structured written reports.** The monitoring of network meetings was done through structured written reports, written by facilitators (that was the role of an NSLE lecturer) after each meeting. All 36 reports from the four facilitators were collected after the end of the Programme. The methodology of the research was based on the document analysis method. The statements were analysed through the coding of key words allocated to one of the four categories defined by Innovative Learning Environments (2013):

- A. *Educators* – teachers, educators and other employees, leaders of employees
- B. *Learning and teaching* – principles, content, competences, pedagogies, students
- C. *Cooperation with the environment* – parents, local community
- D. *Resources* – learning environments, technology

From the reports, we collected examples of good practice and challenges separately.

Examples of **good practice** presented at group meetings (45 cases)

- A. *Educators* – 21 cases (examples: rewarding colleagues; assigning teams as needed; regular annual conversations; knowledge exchange between teachers; inbox for praise and criticism; distributed leadership);
- B. *Learning and teaching* – 15 cases (examples: distance teaching, positive teaching practice; very good international cooperation on various projects; what good things the epidemic has washed away; well-executed preparation for the next school year; implementation of the school's vision);
- C. *Cooperation with the environment* – 8 cases (examples: connection and communication between students, parents and teachers; kindergarten for parents; introductory meetings for parents of newcomers); and
- D. *Resources* – 1 case (example: arranging the surroundings and the interior of the kindergarten)

**Challenges** presented and discussed in group meetings (54 cases):

- A. *Educators*: 26 cases
- B. *Learning and teaching*: 12 cases
- C. *Cooperation with the environment*: 5 cases
- D. *Resources*: 11 cases

- A. *Educators* - The typical questions and issues discussed were related, for example, to the professional learning and performance of teachers: How to encourage teachers for their own professional development and change teaching practices in the classroom (new forms and methods of teaching, use of ICT and education in this area, considering individual differences);
- B. *Learning and teaching* - Safe and stimulating learning environment: How to overcome external factors that affect a safe and stimulating learning environment (imposing more and more obligations on headteachers, socio-economic status of parents, lack of interest of students). Student achievements: How to create a safe environment where the student/child will be accepted, happy, and satisfied and where he will have equal opportunities (regarding needs – deficits or greater abilities) and will be praised for his performance;
- C. *Cooperation with the environment* – examples: how to strengthen the promotion of the school, how to deal with the local authority hindering the work of the headteacher, anonymous reports to the school inspectorate, lack of students;
- D. *Resources* - examples: school renovation, costs of sick leave, financing the school canteen.

At the final meeting headteachers were asked to assess the Programme in just one statement.

Here are some typical statements, which confirm that the aim, goals and structure of the Programme are efficient:

- This Programme is one of the best possible ways for headteachers to connect and collaborate.
- I would like this Programme to continue for it allows for professional debates in small groups, sharing good practices, and solving different leadership challenges.
- Networking is an excellent Programme that gives each of us many ideas, encourages each of us to think about our work, evaluate it, and it enriches us greatly. I want more programmes like this.
- Thank you for preparing the programme for experienced headteachers. The content and the forms of work are up-to-date and flexible. In these challenging times related to the COVID-19 epidemic, the Programme has been among the first to adapt to the new circumstances.



- This Programme must remain. In this year's very challenging conditions, it helped me to keep my "head above water".

These statements allow us to conclude that the headteachers actively reflected on their work and, based upon their reflections, also set goals for their future professional and personal growth.

## Conclusion

The results of the yearly evaluations confirm the effectiveness of the HN Program. The purpose and the goals of the Programme have been achieved every year, even during the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the 10 years of its existence, The Headteachers' networks for leadership development Programme has been successfully realised and adjusted according to regular evaluations of the participating headteachers' needs. Its foundation was regular group meetings in kindergartens and schools, contributing greatly to the achievement of the set goals. The NSLE lecturers as facilitators direct the Programme and are key to establishing trust in each group/network, take care of the organisation of meetings, and lead the meeting dynamics towards the set goals, allowing for enough flexibility as required by the group. The key features to be considered in further developments of the Programme are: small groups of experienced headteachers, professional facilitator, trust, learning in the field (at the schools), individual approach, reflection and peer feedback.

The future of the Programme might be challenged in several ways: (a) there may not be enough applicants eager to learn from diversity; (b) the majority of the headteachers enrolled in the Programme come from kindergartens and primary schools, only a few of them from other institutions; (c) quite a few headteachers who see the benefits of their participation in the Programme enrol repeatedly, consequently lowering the diversity of the networks/groups. A further challenge is to bring the Programme closer to the wider community of headteachers, for the Programme is (too) expensive due to the role of the facilitators. It is necessary to consider whether or not and how to transform the Programme while preserving its positive effects.

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