

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RELATION TO CAREER MOTIVATION AND JOB SATISFACTION

MOJCA ŽVEGLIČ MIHELIČ, MILENA VALENČIČ ZULJAN & ROMINA PLEŠEC
GASPARIČ

Potrjeno/Accepted
4. 10. 2024

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Objavljeno/Published
31. 3. 2025

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR/KORESPONDENČNI AVTOR
mojca.zveglic@pef.uni-lj.si

Keywords:

professional
development,
conception of
professional
development, career
motivation, job
satisfaction, preschool
teachers.

Ključne besede:

profesionalni razvoj,
pojmovanja
profesionalnega razvoja,
motivi za izbiro poklica,
poklicno zadovoljstvo,
vzgojitelji.

UDK/UDC:

37.011.3-051:331.36

Abstract/Izvleček

In this paper, we are interested in preschool teachers' conceptions of professional development in relation to their motives for choosing the profession and professional satisfaction. Results of a study among 145 Slovenian preschool teachers show that they generally have a positive conception of professional development; nevertheless, recognition of the importance of learning and in-depth reflection on this conception depend on career motivations, while a broader conception of professional development increases the likelihood of thinking about leaving the profession more frequently. The findings justify the need for better recognition of preschool teachers' needs and obstacles in the workplace.

Pojmovanja profesionalnega razvoja med vzgojitelji in njihova povezava z motivi izbire poklica in s poklicnim zadovoljstvom

V prispevku nas zanimajo vzgojiteljeva pojmovanja profesionalnega razvoja v povezavi z motivi za izbiro poklica in poklicnim zadovoljstvom. Rezultati raziskave med 145 slovenskimi vzgojitelji kažejo, da v povprečju pozitivno pojmujejo profesionalni razvoj, a je upoštevanje vidika pomena učenja in poglobljene refleksije v tem pojmovanju odvisno od motivov za izbiro poklica, ob celovitejšem pojmovanju profesionalnega razvoja pa tudi pogostejše razmišljanje o zapustitvi poklica. Izsledki raziskave potrjujejo potrebo po boljši pripoznavi potreb vzgojiteljev in njihovih ovirah na delovnem mestu.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.4425>

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Introduction

Present-day social circumstances, with numerous rapid and unpredictable changes, present pedagogical workers with demanding professional roles (Hargreaves, 2003). They are expected to do quality work in several areas, from recognizing individual characteristics and introducing diverse actions that are professionally planned and specific to individual children (e.g., children with special needs, gifted students, and immigrants), to cooperation with parents, colleagues, management and the wider social environment (ETUCE, 2008; Mihelač, 2024; Štemberger and Cencič, 2015). Changed professional roles require pedagogical workers to deepen their learning and to continually cultivate their own professional development (Buchberger et al., 2001; Day, 2002; Day and Gu, 2013), which is no longer just a choice for individual enthusiasts, but a necessity for every pedagogical worker. Even the highest quality initial education cannot train pedagogical workers for an entire career but can only enable them to enter the profession with sufficient quality (Birch et al., 2018; Buchberger et al., 2001). Therefore, one of the important tasks in the initial training of students - future pedagogical workers - becomes the formation of appropriate conceptions of the profession and professional development, which will be based on a thorough knowledge of professional roles and awareness of the need for professional learning throughout their careers. Marentič Požarnik (2006) refers not only to professional competence (knowledge of the curriculum) but also to the competences of effective implementation of the pedagogical process, communication and relationships, organization and leadership, and cooperation, and emphasizes the competence of professional development (cf. General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2013). An individual's conceptions of the profession and professional development are the basis for progressing in their professional development competence. This was demonstrated in the findings of Hmelak and Lepičnik Vodopivec (2013), who studied preschool teachers' expectations in relation to professional development. Their sample consisted of 616 Slovenian and Croatian preschool teachers and students, who reported that they wished they had attended in-service training, read scientific papers, and become able to initiate change. This indicates the need for in-depth learning and being an active agent in professional development, which other authors also point out (e.g., Imants and Van der Wal, 2020).

The professional development of pedagogical workers has been the subject of particularly intensive research over the last 30 years. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017,

p. 2) define it as structured professional learning that results in a change in pedagogical worker's knowledge and behaviour. Professional development is also defined as formal activities that develop a person's skills, knowledge and professionalism: e.g., courses, workshops and formal cooperation between teachers (OECD, 2019). On the other hand, the meaning of multiple informal activities, especially collegial cooperation and support is also stressed (Blanuša Trošelj et al., 2020; Krajnc and Valenčič Zuljan, 2014). Valenčič Zuljan (2001, p. 131, 2018, p. 10) defines professional development as a process of "significant lifelong and experiential learning in which individual concepts get sense and practices are changed. The process includes individual, personal, professional and social dimensions and denotes an advance in critical, independent and responsible decisions and handlings".

Conceptions of professional development (CPD) and the profession itself are an important part of the professional equipment of the pedagogical worker (Valenčič Zuljan, 2007), since they affect the individual's perception, thinking and functioning as well as their willingness to learn professionally. In their research on CPD among preschool teachers, Valenčič Zuljan and Blanuša Trošelj (2014) found that the lowest category of CPD - undifferentiated, simple conceptions that do not show the reflection on the process of their own learning and its purpose - prevails among preschool teachers. This finding raises further questions about the preschool teacher's professional role conceptions and their motivations for choosing the profession.

Motivations for choosing a profession are often divided into three subgroups of motives (Salifu and Agbenyega, 2013): a) extrinsic (e.g., pay, working conditions, time or vacations, etc.), b) intrinsic (e.g., love of the pedagogical profession, love for the subject area, desire for personal and professional development), and c) altruistic (e.g., desire to work with children and youth, desire to contribute to the well-being and development of society). Research on career motivation among Slovenian pedagogical workers (Cencič and Čagran, 2002; Javornik Krečič and Ivanuš Grmek, 2005; Tašner et al., 2017; Žvegljič Mihelič et al., 2022) shows a strong representation of internal and altruistic motivations, which is related to job satisfaction (Heinz, 2015) as well as to commitment to or perseverance in the profession (Sinclair, 2008). Nevertheless, Bergmark et al. (2018) point out that some preschool teachers enter the profession for intrinsic and altruistic motivations but leave it when confronted with a reality that contradicts their perceptions of the profession.

As pointed out by Struyven et al. (2013), an appropriate balance between extrinsic, intrinsic and altruistic motivation is necessary to keep pedagogical workers in the profession and support their professional development.

Since preschool teachers are the first pedagogical workers that children meet when they enter the institutionalized education process, they have a major influence on the early education and development of an individual. Quality performance of the responsible tasks they take on requires good professional qualifications and professional motivation, satisfaction and commitment (Sandstrom et al., 2022). The job satisfaction and motivation of a preschool teacher greatly affect that individual's performance and thus the entire institution (Polishchuk et al., 2022), resulting in successful and high-quality early childhood education and care (Gomerčić, 2022). Karaolis and Philippou (2019) define job satisfaction as a positive or negative attribution of value to their work. The pedagogical worker's job satisfaction is related to their relationships with children, professional challenges, professional autonomy, opportunities to innovate their own practice, participation in decision-making, relations with colleagues and opportunities for professional development. Job satisfaction is significantly related to an individual's commitment to the profession, persistence in the profession and quality pedagogical work, so it is worth exploring and enabling (Day et al., 2007; Assunção Flores and Day, 2006; Huberman, 1993; Karaolis and Philippou, 2019; Lee and Quek, 2017).

Motivations for choosing the profession stem from preconceptions about the profession (cf. Masbirorotni, 2020) and should be modified through initial training so that professional development and the recognition of the need for continuous professional learning is encouraged throughout the preschool teacher's career. In the study, we were interested in CPD of preschool teachers and their connection with motivations for choosing the profession and job satisfaction.

We aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the preschool teachers' CPD?

RQ2: How do the preschool teachers' CPD correlate with their motivations for choosing preschool teaching as a career?

RQ3: What is the nature of the relationship between preschool teachers' overall CPD and their job satisfaction?

Method

The research was designed as a study and data was collected using a survey approach.

Sample

The sample consists of 145 Slovenian preschool teachers. Their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics as a percentage

Characteristic	(n = 145)
Gender	
Female	93.8
Male	6.2
Age range (years)	
Up to 20	4.8
21–40	63.4
41–60	30.3
61 and above	1.4
Level of professional degree	
Secondary school or equivalent	12.4
Teaching diploma	55.2
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	26.9
Master's degree (Master of Science) or specialisation	5.5
Professional title	
No title	46.9
Mentor	30.3
Consultant	20.7
Senior consultant	2.1

Instrument

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire designed exclusively for the study. It consists of multiple sections, but in this paper, we present the results of analysis for the following: a) motivations for choosing preschool teaching, b) job satisfaction, c) CPD in the preschool teaching profession, and d) frequency of thinking about leaving the profession. Additionally, the respondents' personal characteristics are included in the questionnaire: gender, age, level of education, and level of professional degree.

The Conceptions of Professional Development scale (CPD scale) includes six items on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The Motives for Choosing Preschool Teaching scale (MPT scale) consists of 12 items on a 5-point rating scale, from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). The respondents rated their job satisfaction on a 3-point rating scale, from 1 (*dissatisfied*) to 3 (*satisfied*), while the frequency of thinking about leaving the profession was measured on a 3-point rating scale, from 1 (*never*) to 3 (*often*).

Data collection and analysis procedures

The online survey was conducted during a two-month period (response rate was 60%). Structural validity and reliability of the scales were established with exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Given the small number of items on the CPD scale, the overall scale was included in the analyses. The share of total variance explained by the first component of the scale indicates sufficient structural validity of the scale (44.57%), while the share of total variance explained by all components (73.99%) as well as Cronbach's alpha for the total scale ($\alpha = .65$) suggest acceptable reliability of the scale. Based on the EFA results, the MPT scale was modified, aggregate variables were formed, and the final scales were tested for reliability (the results of the EFA have already been reported in detail, see Žveglič Mihelič et al., 2022). Principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted separately on the group of items from the scale with orthogonal rotation (Varimax). The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (KMO) verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis (KMO = .84), while Bartlett's test of sphericity for the analyses indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for the PCA, $\chi^2 (55) = 704.08$, $p = .000$.

Only the components that had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 in the initial analysis were retained finally (see Table 2).

Table 2

Keiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, results of Bartlett's test of sphericity, percentage of total variance explained by the components, and Cronbach's alpha for the scales

Scale	Keiser-Meyer-Olkin measure	Bartlett's test of sphericity	% of total variance explained by the components	Cronbach's alpha
CPD	.64	$\chi^2 (15) = 369.35$, $p = .000$	73.99	.65
MPT	.84	$\chi^2 (55) = 704.08$, $p = .000$	65.92	.65

Note. CPD = conceptions of professional development, MPT = motivations for choosing preschool teaching.

Table 3 presents the final loadings after rotation for the MPT scale. The items that cluster on the same components suggest that component 1 represents the *Intrinsic and altruistic motives* variable, and component 2 represents the *Motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession* variable. One item (“4. Working hours suit me”) had to be removed from the model because it lowered the reliability of the sub-scale, and one item (“7. The profession has a good reputation in society”) had to be omitted from the component score because of its high loading on different components. The sub-scales of the final 2-component model had high reliabilities of .82 and .84.

Table 3

Summary of EFA for the MPT scale

Motives for choosing preschool teaching	Rotated factor loading	
	Intrinsic and altruistic motives	Motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession
1. It offers the opportunity for creativity and originality	.78	
2. It is socially useful work	.77	
6. I have the possibility of postgraduate studies	.73	
7. The profession has a good reputation in society	.73	
10. The profession provides me with a regular income	.68	
5. I like working with children	.64	
12. The preschool teacher profession encourages and enables professional development throughout my career	.63	
9. A preschool teacher's work is not demanding		.88
11. The preschool teacher profession is a tradition in my family		.80
3. There are long holidays		.76
8. Studies are not demanding		.71
Eigenvalues	4.43	2.82
% of variance	40.29	25.63
α	.84	.82

Note. The extraction method was principal component analysis with an orthogonal (Varimax) rotation. Factor loadings below .40 were omitted.

Results and discussion

Preschool teachers' conceptions of professional development (CPD)

One of the most important tasks of undergraduate studies is the formation of students' conceptions of the chosen profession, since these conceptions facilitate

the professional development of the individual based on a thorough knowledge of professional roles and the need for continuous professional learning. Based on this, we sought to find out how preschool teachers in our research perceive professional development in the preschool teaching profession. They were asked to respond to six statements about preschool teachers' professional development by choosing their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *strongly disagree*, 5 – *strongly agree*). The statements cover two aspects of CPD: 1) importance of learning and in-depth reflection (statements 1, 3 and 4); and 2) importance of cooperation (statements 2, 5 in 6). Descriptive statistics for each statement are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Average agreement with individual statements about professional development

Statements about professional development	M	SD
3. Professional development lasts until the end of the preschool teacher's career.	4.28	.994
5. Headteacher has a significant influence on the professional growth of employees.	4.18	.872
6. Colleagues have a significant influence on the professional development of everyone.	4.16	.853
2. Cooperation between preschool teachers is one of the forms of professional development.	4.14	1.215
4. There is no professional development of preschool teachers without in-depth reflection.	4.14	.969
1. The preschool teacher's professional development requires continuous in-depth learning by the individual.	4.13	1.219

Results show that the preschool teachers generally agree with all the statements, indicating their recognition of the importance of cooperation, but also of learning and in-depth reflection. Table 4 shows the highest level of agreement with the general item about the duration of professional development, followed by three items related to the influence of other people on the individual's professional development, while the last two are focused on the individual as the main agent in their own development. These findings are in line with professional development research (Day et al., 2007; Day and Gu, 2013; Javornik Krečič et al., 2015; Valenčič Zuljan, 2018), which emphasize the importance of cooperation and reflection as fundamental factors in professional development.

Preschool teachers' conceptions of professional development (CPD) in relation to their motivations for choosing preschool teaching as a career

Previous research by Valenčič Zuljan and Blanuša Trošelj (2014), who included 92 Croatian preschool teachers, has shown that most preschool teachers' conceptions reflected in their answers to open-ended questions fall into the lower category of CPD, namely undifferentiated, one-dimensional, simplistic conceptions that show no reflection on the individual's learning process and its purpose. The more complex conceptions that show reflection on the learning process and the benefits of professional change on their own pedagogical practice are the least present in preschool teachers (Valenčič Zuljan and Blanuša Trošelj, 2014). To promote professional development among pedagogical workers, it is important to know their motivations for choosing this profession and take into account that extrinsic, altruistic, and intrinsic motivations should be appropriately balanced (Struyven et al., 2013) so that special attention can be paid to their individual needs. Thus, we sought to explore the possible relationship between CPD and the type of motivation for choosing the profession.

For this reason, we formed an aggregate variable named *Conception of professional development score* (CPD score) as a sum of responses to all six statements from Table 4. As for the individual items, a higher mean score represents stronger general agreement with various aspects of professional development, or a more positive overall CPD. The average scores indicate a positive CPD score ($M = 4.17$, $SD = .63$). In terms of the motives for choosing preschool teaching, the preschool teachers rated motives associated with intrinsic motivation as the most important ($3.75 \leq M \leq 4.42$, see Žvegljić Mihelić et al., 2022, p. 79), while motives associated with extrinsic motivation were rated lower ($2.51 \leq M \leq 2.91$, *ibid.*). For further analysis, we grouped the EFA motives from Table 3 into two groups of career choice motives and thus two aggregate variables: *Intrinsic and altruistic motives* (established by high intrinsic motivation; IM) and *Motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession* (established by high extrinsic motivation; EM). IM proved to be statistically significantly more important on average for preschool teachers ($M_{IM} = 3.75$) than EM ($M_{EM} = 2.60$) when choosing a preschool teaching career, $t(116) = 7.89$, $p < .001$. These findings were previously confirmed by other studies for preservice and in-service teachers (Andrews and Hatch, 2002; Assunção Flores and Niklasson, 2014; Cencić and Čagran, 2002; Javornik Krečič and Ivanuš Grmek, 2005; Polak and Devjak, 2014; Tašner et al., 2017; Watt and Richardson, 2012; Zoglowek, 2021).

In Table 5 we present correlations between CPD score and types of motivation when choosing the preschool teaching profession.

Table 5

Spearman's correlation coefficients between types of motivation when choosing the preschool teaching profession and CPD score

Correlations	IM	EM	CPD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
IM	1.000								
EM	-.223*	1.000							
CPD score	.605**	-.552**	1.000						
1. The preschool teacher's professional development requires continuous in-depth learning by the individual.	.614**	-.424**	.730**	1.000					
2. Cooperation between preschool teachers is one of the forms of professional development.	.477**	-.377**	.727**	.649**	1.000				
3. Professional development lasts until the end of the preschool teacher's career.	.500**	-.531**	.688**	.523**	.527**	1.000			
4. There is no professional development of preschool teachers without in-depth reflection.	.328**	-.318**	.680**	.431**	.345**	.285**	1.000		
5. Headteacher has a significant influence on the professional growth of employees.	.028	-.049	.379**	-.107	-.053	.158	.431**	1.000	
6. Colleagues have a significant influence on the professional development of everyone.	-.120	.088	.279**	-.133	-.108	.022	.275**	.596**	1.000

Note. IM = intrinsic and altruistic motives, EM = motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession, CPD score = conception of professional development score.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between IM and CPD score, $r_s = .61$, $p < .01$, indicating that the more intrinsic and altruistic motives were present in a preschool teacher when choosing the profession, the more positive overall CPD was present in that person. IM is also positively correlated with all the specific CPD, except for item 5 ("Headteacher has a significant influence on the professional growth of employees"), $r_s = .03$, and item 6 ("Colleagues have a significant influence on the professional development of everyone"), $r_s = -.12$ (both $ps > .05$); these two items are not significantly related to the IM.

These results indicate that more expressed IM typically means a more fully expressed learning-oriented conception of professional development, but not a more expressed interaction-oriented conception of professional development.

On the other hand, the results indicate a significant negative relationship between CPD score and EM, $r_s = -.55$, $p < .01$. This means that the more motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession were present in a person, the less complex CPD was typical for that person. Most of the items on the CPD scale (items 1, 3, and 4, representing learning-oriented CPD, as well as item 2 (interaction-oriented CPD) are negatively correlated to EM, except for items 5, $r_s = -.05$, and 6, $r_s = .09$, which are unrelated to EM. Overall, the results imply that the more EM is present in a person, the less learning-oriented CPD is significant for that person. Interaction-oriented CPD, on the other hand, seems unrelated to motivation for choosing preschool teaching as a career (neither IM nor EM).

These findings point out that since preschool teachers are not the only agents of cooperation, the locus of control in this aspect of professional development is external (Rotter, 1966). Cooperation with others is regarded as a fact and an outside factor in one's professional development, while one's learning and in-depth reflection is predominantly subjected to that person's decision and, obviously, intrinsic motivation.

The nature of the relationship between preschool teachers' overall conception of professional development (CPD) and their job satisfaction

According to previous studies (Day et al., 2007; Assunção Flores and Day, 2006; Huberman, 1993; Lee and Quek, 2017), pedagogical worker's job satisfaction and their professional perseverance are related, among other things, to the opportunities for professional development. We were interested in establishing the nature of the association between preschool teachers' CPD and their job satisfaction.

We asked the preschool teachers to rate their job satisfaction on a scale, from 1 – *dissatisfied* to 3 – *satisfied*. More than half the respondents answered that they were satisfied with their job (56.9%), while 40.5% were neither dissatisfied nor satisfied. Only 2.6% of them were dissatisfied with their job. Mandarić Vukušić and Krstulović (2024) similarly found on the sample of 206 Croatian preschool teachers, that they were generally satisfied with their work and professional role ($M = 4.23$ on a 5-point scale) as well as with other, more specific, elements of their work.

Other studies also found that even though preschool teachers are satisfied with their jobs, they still wish the pay was higher and that this profession were more appreciated in society (Mandarić Vukušić and Krstulović, 2024; Sandstrom et al., 2022).

Additionally, we asked the preschool teachers about the frequency of thinking about leaving the preschool teaching profession as a manifestation of job satisfaction. Most of them (71.2%) responded that they had never thought about leaving the profession, while a quarter of them (26.0%) thought about it from time to time. Only 2.9% of the preschool teachers reported that they often thought about leaving the profession. Modrej and Cugmas (2015) obtained similar results among primary school teachers. As expected, the frequency of thinking about leaving the profession is significantly negatively correlated to job satisfaction ($r_s = - .32$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the more satisfied one is with their job, the less frequently they think about leaving the profession. On the other hand, Mandarić Vukušić and Krstulović (2024), who also dealt with preschool teachers' professional commitment in the context of job satisfaction, point out that despite high levels of commitment, preschool teachers are especially susceptible to leaving the profession in the early stages of their professional career when they still lack mechanisms to cope with stress, so it is key to offer them appropriate support. Similar findings have been reported by other authors (Bergmark et al., 2018; Žveglič Mihelič et al., 2022).

Further results show a statistically significant positive correlation between CPD and job satisfaction ($r_s = .23$, $p < .05$); the more positive conception of professional development suggests a higher level of job satisfaction. But CPD is also positively related to the frequency of thinking about leaving the preschool teaching profession ($r_s = .21$, $p < .05$), meaning that the more positive the conception of professional development the preschool teacher has, the more frequently they think about leaving the preschool teaching profession.

These results indicate that even though more positive overall CPD suggests a higher level of job satisfaction, it also plays a role in one's scepticism about staying in the profession. Considering that more positive CPD indicates a broader and thus more complex understanding of professional development, perhaps some of the preschool teachers with more positive CPD were more critical of themselves, their role in the preschool teaching process and of the discrepancy between the elements of professional development that were and were not present in their case, more often leading them to think they could not rise to the standards they set for themselves or perceived were expected of them to rise to.

Conclusion

Preschool teachers are key actors in the implementation of quality preschool education, so their preparation for the profession is vital, as is their readiness for professional development as a process of significant lifelong and experiential learning that includes two important aspects: the importance of learning and in-depth reflection, and the importance of cooperation. The degree of involvement in their own professional development is inherently related to their conceptions of that development.

Our research indicates that preschool teachers generally have a positive overall conception of professional development but associate it more with cooperation than with learning and in-depth reflection. The interaction-oriented conception of professional development proved to be unrelated either to intrinsic and altruistic motives for choosing the profession or to motives based on a simplistic view of studies and profession (extrinsic motives). The learning-oriented conception of professional development, however, proved to be positively linked to the intrinsic and altruistic motives for choosing the profession and negatively to the extrinsic motives. This means that preschool teachers who were led by intrinsic and altruistic motives in their career choice developed a more comprehensive conception of professional development. The findings also reflect underlying differences in the perceived need for one's own contribution in cooperation with others as a collective process compared to learning and in-depth reflection for which individual responsibility and mobilization are inevitable, often exclusive and thus dependent on intrinsic motivation.

Results also show that a comprehensive conception of professional development, despite job satisfaction, increases the likelihood of thinking about leaving the profession more frequently. This suggests a degree of despair among preschool teachers, who feel that they lack the resources to fulfil the (perceived) expectations placed on them as pedagogical workers.

A person's conceptions of their profession and their professional development are the basis for progress in their professional development competence. For quality professional learning among pedagogical workers, it is necessary to further justify the importance of particular training for the individual, so that everyone feels its significance and long-term contribution.

The fact that the most reflective preschool teachers sometimes contemplate leaving their profession justifies the need for greater recognition of their needs and management of any distress they may face in their workplace.

Considering preschool teachers' conception of professional development, motivation for choosing the profession, and job satisfaction makes it possible to find ways to attract motivated students, ensure quality initial education, attract qualified staff who undergo continuous professional learning and development, and retain them in the profession.

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Authors:

Dr. Mojca Žvegljč Mihelič,

Asistentka, Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija e-pošta: mojca.zveglic@pef.uni-lj.si
Assistant, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: mojca.zveglic@pef.uni-lj.si

Dr. Milena Valenčič Zuljan,

Redna profesorica, Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija e-pošta: milena.valencic@pef.uni-lj.si
Full Professor, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: milena.valencic@pef.uni-lj.si

Dr. Romina Plešec Gasparič,

Docentka, Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija e-pošta: romina.plesecgasparic@pef.uni-lj.si

Assistant Professor, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, Kardeljeva pl. 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: romina.plesecgasparic@pef.uni-lj.si