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Managers' opinion about recognizing neoliberalism in education in Slovenia

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Abstract

In this paper, we presented how schools perceive the introduction of the free market and market mechanisms through deregulation policies and privatisation schemes. We also discussed the consequences and traps of the free market. The research presents how education personnel see changes in education; and how managers versus other school workers understand the free market and what their attitude is towards public education. There are many different perspectives on the position and role of education in society, in particular whether education is a public good and should be protected at all costs or if education should be subject to monitoring and efficient organisation, as advocated by neoliberals. From this research, it is clear that school system employees believe that public education is a public good and should be protected as such. The results also show that school managers (comparing them with other school workers) are the most favorable to the claim that 'public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized' and to the claim that 'public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs'. Education is a relatively large and important part of the public sector, and one of the key problems of modern society is how to find a way to reform positive common social goals which are not only limited to the optimisation of the education system.

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1. Introduction

There is no general definition of managerialism, but it can be said that managerialism is an ideology based on the belief that optimization of the productivity and outcomes of all organisations can be achieved through the application of the managerial expertise, theories and techniques, this applies to both private and public organisations (Doran 2016). More or less, the decisions made by managers, also in the schools, are affected in some way by effects of neoliberalism, an ideology which sees schools as a market.

The neoliberal perspective on education started to spread in the mid-1980s. Amongst other institutions promoting the new “neoliberal system” in education were the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). The pressure for a different perspective on education intensified in 1994 with the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Davies and Bansel (2007) define neoliberalism as a means to make subjects or democratic citizens both more governable and more capable to service capital. Neoliberalism in education would mean that education, as a public service would be left to the free market. The neoliberal concept changes school into a business (Laval 2005, 26). This is also reflected in the fact that instead of discussing knowledge and behavior, we talk about competencies and knowledge for professions. Babnik et al. (2014) find that the ten most frequently written words related to organizational values are: customer, value, people, company, product, business, services, community, work, and quality. Schools are comparable to businesses. It is demanded of them to be efficient and to justify the funds they use.

In this paper, we will ask about the recognition of neoliberalism in education. We will present how schools and school managers perceive the introduction of the free market and market mechanisms through deregulation policies and privatisation schemes.

We divided this paper into five sections; in the second section we outlined the development of the “market” as a core category in the economy, in the third section we discuss education, which should be accessible to everyone. In 1995, Slovenia became a member of the WTO, and thus we have also been discussing the liberalisation of services for a long time, particularly the deregulation and decentralisation of education, the development of private schools, and the possibility of choice and integration with the market. In the fourth chapter, the analysis and research findings are presented on - how schools and school managers perceive a) that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized b) that public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs. In the conclusion, we summarize that education is a part of the public sector and therefore cannot avoid the issue of more efficient operations. At the same time, we agree that the primary role of education should be preserved in favor of general worldliness and wider thinking.

2. Market – neoliberalism as an economic doctrine

We will show the development of the “market” as a core category in the economy, present the “free market” and the political and ideological dimensions of the market economy.

Polanyi (1957, 56) states: “A market is a meeting place for the purpose of barter or buying and selling”, and continues to say that by the end of the 18th century the market was considered a physical area where people exchanged goods and services, and not an abstract institution where you could regulate and direct socio-economic activities. This did not occur until the concept of capitalism, and on an ideological level, the concept of economic liberalism was introduced.

The agenda of neoliberal policies is closely connected with the global activities of international financial and economic institutions who all eagerly promote neoliberal policies. International financial institutions have, with the help of (loans to developing countries) economic policy reforms, such as structuring programmes for adaptation, contributed to the wide range of policies, including liberalisation, privatisation and free market economic efficiency. In particular, developing countries are forced to adopt neoliberal policies in order to accelerate their economic progress and to meet the criteria set by the World Bank. The purpose of global trade organisations is the further liberalisation of trade with services, particularly through privatisation of services which the government took care of and opening borders (Dowling and Chin-Fang 2007, 251-254).

Harvey (2007, 2) states: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.

Prechel and Harms (2007, 5) discussed the five processes of neoliberalism: “To achieve this goal, neoliberalism advocates several changes in the relationship between societies and states: (1) expand markets by eliminating government policies interfering with markets, (2) cut taxes to simultaneously reduce the resources of inefficient government and channel them to private investors for capital formation, (3) privatize by selling public properties to private economic actors, (4) commodify things that were not originally produced to be exchanged in the market (e.g., health, education, pollution), and (5) eliminate social programs to establish personal responsibility.”

Consequently, a number of countries started to implement the free market and market mechanisms through deregulation policies and privatisation schemes; the purpose is to liberate and facilitate the market which in turn encourages education implementers. Roberts and Peters (2008, 9) discuss: “For an ultimately moral doctrine based on a classical account of political and economic freedom - a marriage of the “free market” and the “open society” - neoliberalism has a violent past.” Roberts and Peters (2008, 9-13) advocate that an important argument in favour of the market is its ability to create social benefits through innovation and development of new services; whilst at the same time the free market encourages competitiveness and the implementation of reward schemes for success lead towards the increased efficiency of the public sector.

A global economic crisis has actualized questions about the adequacy and efficiency of public spending for higher education (Lesjak, Skrbinjek and Šušteršič 2017). Marjetič and Lesjak (2012) stress that economical and costs effective use of resources at HEI are crucial in order to stimulate them to achieve national strategic objectives; in this respect mechanisms for allocation of public funds are needed. Ocvirk and Trunk Širca (2012) show that human resource management is becoming increasingly important for the success of HEIs, as well as the organisation of teaching towards learning. Gomezelj Omerzel, Babnik and Trunk Širca (2008) and Jošt (2012) argue that an effective system for validation must be developed and performed with the cooperation of all interested parties: government, educational institutions, employers and employees.

In recent years we have seen many universities take specific actions to adapt to the new social and business needs of the market (Moustaghfir and Trunk Širca 2010). However, university–government model views the university as possessing a double mission of education and basic research, where the output is portrayed as a public good. Government acts as the primary funder of academic research, where the research is disseminated as a ‘free good’ to society, whereas transferring products or processes to industry is of secondary importance (Dooley and Kirk 2007; Arzenšek, Košmrlj, Trunk Širca 2013). Developing innovation networks might positively influence research and development performance, boost creation of new knowledge (Dermol et al. 2013). Changes in cultural life have been underway since the late 1970s with the institutionalisation of market policies. Today the free market is a fact which the public sector will have to get used to, regardless of the advantages and disadvantages of these changes.

3. Neoliberal perspective on (public) education

In the 1980s, particularly in American and Latin American countries, neoliberalism was the main educational doctrine. International financial and economic institutions had a remarkable influence on this.

Laval (2005) in his book *School is not a business: neoliberal attack on public education* presented the difference between “old and new” and between liberal and neoliberal views on education. Neoliberalism as a concept understands education as a private good, which as any other good is best assured by the market. In the neoliberal valuing system both professional and vocational education which are key for training the workforce in the economy are important. In contrast with the neoliberal perspective, the liberal conception of education is that it is a public good and a basic human right. The liberal view on education is expressed with the emphasis on ethical and cultural values and on the benefits of general education. The latter is important for the expansion of human and spiritual horizons and to go beyond the particular thinking trapped in narrow professional boundaries. Barle, Trunk Širca and Jošt Lešer (2013) stress the importance of lifelong learning, whose implementation can be very contradictory, because it includes in particular those who have a high level of education, rather than those who do not possess a high degree of social and cultural capital. Lifelong learning shall thus serve for strengthening particular elements of

instrumentalisation and neoliberalism or for consolidating important democratic elements and possibilities of the individual.

Laval (2005) attempts to present a new concept for the education model, where education is a private good with an economic value. The inspiration for these changes lie in neoliberal theory (Laval mentions in particular Milton Friedman), which has set itself the objective of removing the state from education. .” Laval (2005) emphasizes that “due to neoliberal conception, in every school, regardless of whether it is public or private, we see businesses in competitive positions trying to lure in clients with attractive offers. Laval (2005) also sees possible negative impact of neoliberalism:” The problem is not only that a school becomes a “business” that has to compete on the market, but that schools are without state protection and are also much more open to direct equity interests, from a globalisation perspective – large corporations.

Lawrence Blum from the University of Massachusetts at Boston is very critical about impact of neoliberalism:” Far from supporting public education’s original purpose, to lift children out of poverty, neoliberalism accepts extreme inequalities in society and education (Columbia University 2015)”. Portelli, 2013 and De Saxe, 2015 also see negative impacts of neoliberalism in education. Neoliberal transformation of schooling can be observed by instrumentalization of teaching and learning, the contemporary cult of effectiveness and efficiency, competition and the shift toward standardized models of curriculum saturated by the demand to meet district quotas and perform well on regional tests (Portelli 2013).

Laval warns that neoliberalism, despite all the criticism, is expanding and changing education. Not only due to pressure from institutions such as the OECD and European Commission, but also due to the belief that the neoliberal view on education is an unavoidable fact which is impossible to stop (Laval 2005, 307).

Therefore, we are asking if in the EU, where the European Commission are setting different policies, we can avoid the neoliberal concepts in education. The European Commission has not set any binding documentation in the field of education. This was also found by Trunk Širca, Čepar, Lesjak and Zver (2009) and Kodolja (2005), who discuss the policies of the European Commission, where the organisation of the school system is defined by each individual member state in addition, each country decides whether education is a private good, which will operate by supply and demand or is a public good, where the state will take care of equal opportunities to education and will also financially take care of education for all its citizens.

4. Research – methodology and results

The purpose of this research is to analyze the situation in Slovenia and find out the opinion of education personnel at different positions (managers, teachers, administrative staff) and at different types of institutions (kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, higher vocational colleagues and higher education institutions) and to discuss the differences. The questionnaire was focused on what is the attitude of education personnel at different levels towards public education.

4.1. Methodology

We designed a questionnaire for our research, which was then sent to institutions from the field of education in Slovenia (kindergartens, elementary schools, secondary schools, higher vocational colleagues and higher education institutions). Head teachers/deputy head teachers, teachers/professional staff and administrative/technical personnel, answered the questionnaires.

The questionnaire was prepared using Ika (an open source application which offers support for web service surveys), and was composed of 10 closed questions. The questionnaire was sent in December 2015 to all educational institutions (around 1000). We received 692 completed questionnaires from those asked, from which 584 were suitable for analysis. Hereinafter, the analysis and interpretation of responses are presented.

4.2. Sample characteristics

Of the 584 completed questionnaires, most respondents were teachers and professional staff (52 %), followed by management (38 %), with the least respondents being administrative/technical personnel (10%).

Out of 584 respondents, 112 (19%) were male and 472 (81%) female. On average, the respondents are aged 46, the youngest aged 25 and the oldest 64. Regarding the type of institution, 35 % of respondents were from secondary schools, 35% from elementary schools, 18% from kindergartens, 10 % from higher education institutions, and 4% of respondents from higher vocational colleges.

The majority of institutions were from central Slovenia 169 (29%), followed by institutions from the Savinjska 93 (16%), Podravska 76 (13%), Pomurska 70 (12%) and Gorenjska 64 (11%) regions. In the remaining regions of Slovenia, less than 20% responded to the questionnaire.

4.3. Public education: subject to monitoring or protected at all costs?

In the ninth question, respondents had to give their opinion on claims about public education. They had to respond to two claims:

- public education is subject to monitoring and should be efficiently organised
- public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs

Respondents expressed their level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 5; where 1 represented “I don’t agree”, and 5 represented “I completely agree”. The opinion of respondents was similar for both claims; the claim that public education is a public good and thus protected at all costs had an average agreement rating of 3.5 on the five-point scale whilst the claim that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organised had an average agreement rating of 3.3.

Further, we analyzed the opinion on those two claims from two viewpoints:

- the type of institution in which the respondents work
- the position that the respondents have

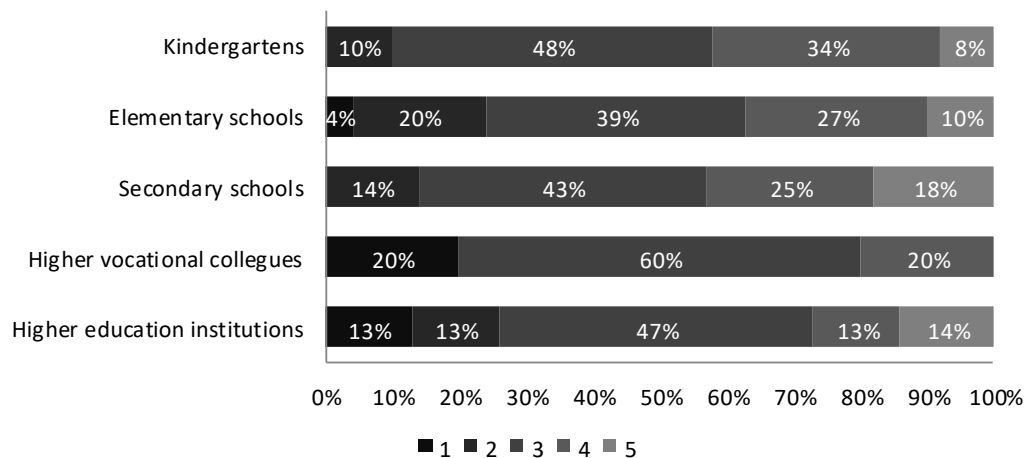


Fig. 1. Claim that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organised (by individual institution) (N 554).

The figure above clearly shows that the respondents agree to a large extent with the claim that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized (almost nobody contradicted the claim, valued with 1), which proves that they are satisfied with the current situation.

The reaction to the second claim is interesting, public education is a public good and has to be protected at all costs. As we can see from the figure below, the majority of respondents say that public education is a public good and has to be protected at all costs, without any form of monitoring (similarly also almost nobody contradicted the claim, valued with 1), from which it is possible to conclude that they want to be protected and wish all “problems” to

be solved internally within the institution. This view is especially expressed amongst higher education personnel (33 % completely agree with the claim) and higher education institutions (41 % completely agree with the claim).

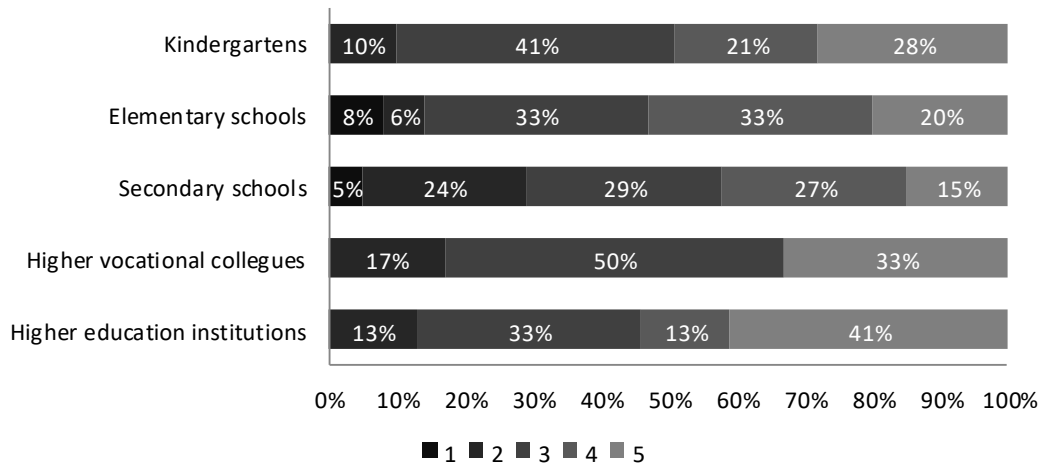


Fig. 2. Claim that public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs (by institutions) (N 554).

Additionally we analyzed both claims by respondents’ position: managers’ vs others, which is presented in figures 3 and 4.

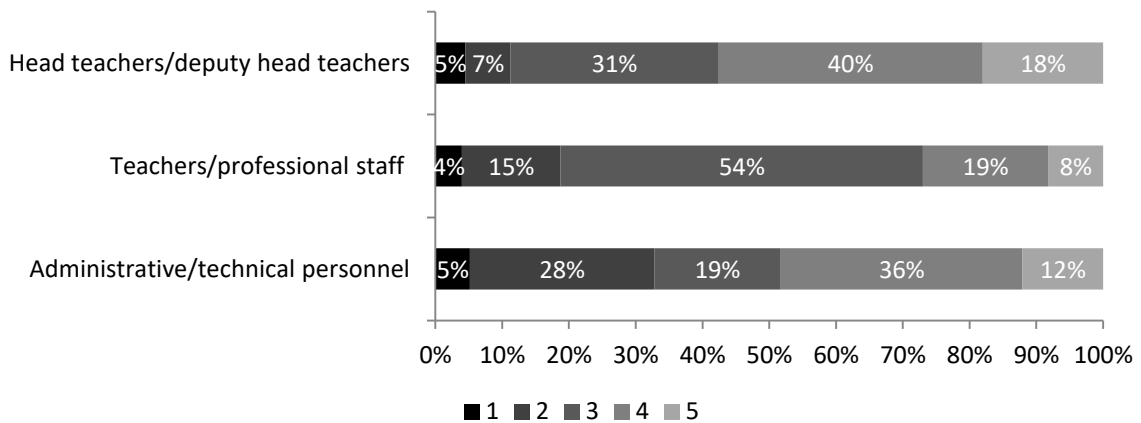


Fig. 3. Claim that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized (by respondents’ position: managers vs others).

The figure above shows that managers in great extend agree with the claim, that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized (18% completely agree with this statement, 39,6% agree). Teachers/professional staff and administrative/technical personnel are more critical about this claim.

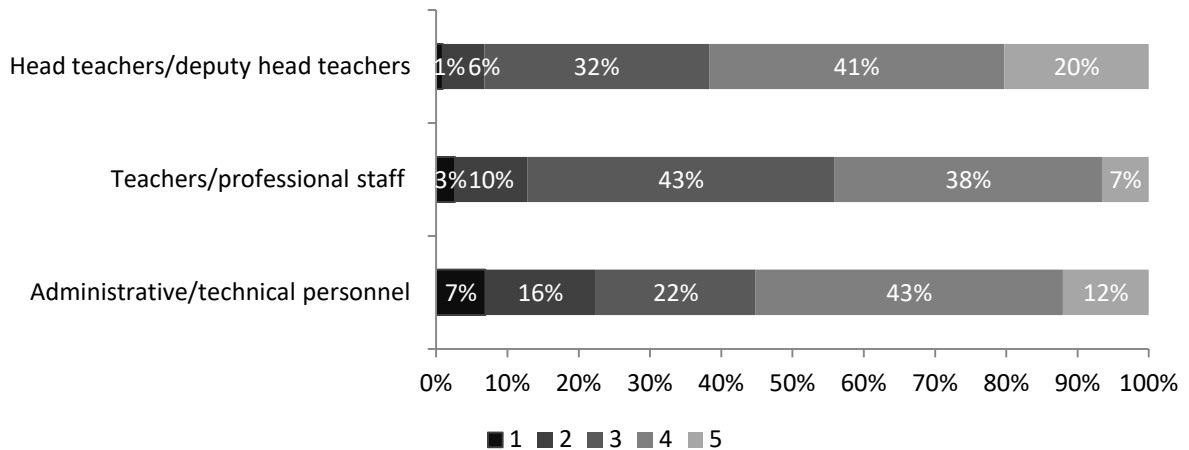


Fig. 4. Claim that public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs (by respondents' position).

If we compare managers results with the results of two other groups we clearly see that managers are the most supportive to the opinion that public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs (20,3 % managers completely agree with this statement, 41,4% agree).

Šušteršič (2014) attempted to clarify the reasons why the Ministry for Education and Teachers Union wish to avoid monitoring and measuring results in schools, as the schools that perform above average are private. The support of parents and the general public, who could have benefited from private schools, is a matter that i.e. the left-wing policies consistently refuse and want to neutralise at all costs. In favor of “public and independent schools”, the political left-wing maintains the average, where it still has a monopoly over the assignment of head teachers where parents waive the right to educate their children in accordance with their own beliefs, where children are purposefully indoctrinated into an atheist ideology such as secularism, Christian-phobia, theories on sex and pro-abortion reproductive “freedom”. Such a mind-set would be rejected with disgust as a methodology for evaluating schools. The issue obviously is not methodology but the classification itself. Do we really still live in a society where it is necessary to pretend that we are all working equally and are equally successful, and we can only speak about these differences behind closed doors?

4.4. Changes in the field of education

In the tenth question we asked by level of agreement with claims about changes in the field of education. There were ten sentences. The claims were ranked on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represented “I don't agree” and 5 represented “I completely agree.”

The respondents agreed most with the claim that the reputation of teachers is worsening and social and cultural differences are increasing (both 4.2). This was followed by the claim that: general knowledge is worsening (3.7), social networks have a greater importance in socialisation than schools (3.6), pupils are less motivated to learn (3.5), other (3.4), where it was most commonly stated that: private schools are lowering their criteria, importance of competencies, self-initiative of an individual for education and education has become administrative and diffused, then teachers are less loyal to schools (3.2), quality of schools is increasing (3.1), education is increasingly accessible to all (3.0) and education outside of school is increasingly high quality (2.9).

Further, we analyzed the opinion on the claim that ‘reputation of teachers is worsening’ from two viewpoints:

- the type of institution in which the respondents work - whether the respondents believed that the reputation of teachers in all institutions was worsening
- the position that the respondents have (the view of managers vs others on this claim)

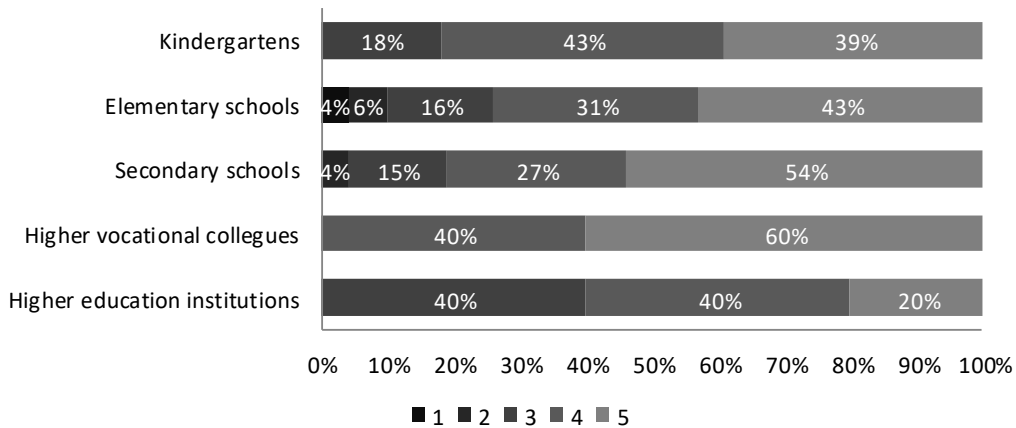


Fig. 5. Claim that the reputation of teachers is worsening (by individual institution) (N 557).

From the figure above it is clear that the reputation of teachers is worsening the most in secondary and higher vocational colleagues (55% - 60% completely agreed with the claim). The reputation of teachers at higher education institutions are also worsening, however only 20% of respondents agreed completely.

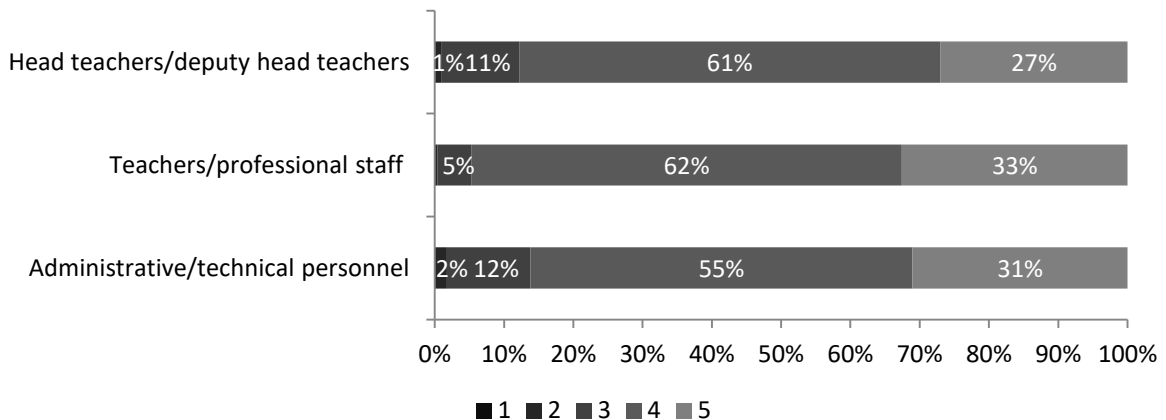


Fig. 6. Claim that the reputation of teachers is worsening (by respondents' position: managers vs others).

The figure 6 shows, that the most critical about this claim are teachers (32,6% completely agree with the claim, 62,2% agree). However also managers and administrative/technical personnel in great extend agree with this claim (more than 85% respondents completely agree or agree with the claim).

5. Conclusion – managers opinion about neoliberalism in education

In this paper we have presented the field of education from a neoliberal perspective. We are faced with the fact that there are many different perspectives on the position and role of education in society, in particular whether education is a public good and should be protected at all costs or if education should be subject to monitoring and efficient organisation, as advocated by neoliberals. From this research, it is clear that school system employees believe that public education is a public good and should be protected as such. They believe that changes in the field of education do not influence well on the quality of schools (on a 5 point scale it was ranked at 3.1). The social and cultural differences are increasing and consequently so are the changes in education, where the reputation of teachers

is decreasing (highlighted mostly as being negative). Managers (if comparing them with two other groups involved in the research) are the most supportive to the claim that public education is subject to monitoring and efficiently organized which demonstrates that they are in general supportive to this aspect of neoliberal approach. Managers, comparing them with two other groups are also very supportive to the claim that public education is a public good and therefore has to be protected at all costs. Managers also agree in great extent with the statement that the reputation of teachers is worsening.

Limitation of this research is that we only focus on one aspect related to neoliberal approach (public education as subject to monitoring and efficiently organized) which means that we cannot say what general opinion of respondents on neoliberalism is. Possibilities of afterwards developments of research could be by implementing more in-depth research focusing of different aspects on neoliberalism in education (that have not been examined in our research) or by comparing the opinions of managers in private education and managers in public education regarding their views on neoliberalism.

Olssen and Peters (2005, 316-317) advocate the free market in the public sector, as it creates a more flexible and efficient public sector. Under neoliberalism, markets have become a new technology by which control can be affected and performance enhanced, in the public sector.”

Neoliberalism is defined as introducing competitiveness and other principles, rules, logic and market value into systems. In a more competitive environment, public institutions must decide what their priorities are, gain independent funding and set strategy for enticing users. Some countries introduced competition due to the financial crisis, others because neoliberal government believes that more competition within the system will lead towards improvements in quality, productivity and accountability of the public sector.

Dolenc (2011) in his blog, warns us about the central problem of neoliberalism: “The central problem of neoliberalism is that it is structurally impossible to define another common social goal other than optimising the rules by which society operates to the best of our abilities. The only common social goal is setting up a system which will be as efficient as possible. The goal of neoliberal policies is only to improve “programmes”, by which society functions, so that will be as optimal as possible.”

At the Crisis roundtable, neoliberalism: the fate of economics and management, Kuzmanič (2009) emphasized that we have: “to manage the world crisis as a whole, in which western civilisation does not appear as its saviour but as the main generator of the crisis.” He sees a problem with economy being connected to the idea of management, where he explains that “The question of economy is a question of science as the basis of ideology in the western world. Management is not about science but about knowledge. With every piece of knowledge, there is an emphasis on its efficacy here and now. Its usefulness is how much it is worth. This is the new reality, which does not have elements of future; the key category of management is the customer.” Management has become the leading ideology, a trait of modern society and not least techniques and methods for leading people, organisations and social communities.

As Laval (2005) says, “a school is not a business”, which he warns using the same title as his book. But just the fact that he emphasises this shows that the view of education is changing and that it no longer goes without saying that a school is not a business. Barle Lakota et al (2016) discuss the virtues and conclude that virtues have to be in the centre of quality education system, only this could lead to successful integration in the international society.

In a neoliberal education regime, the situation cannot be viewed as black and white; there are a number of different views in different situations from individual countries. In 1995, Slovenia signed a contract with the WTO, and thus we have also been discussing deregulations and decentralization of education, the development of private schools, and the possibility of choice and integration with the market.

Education is a relatively large and important part of the public sector, and one of the key problems of modern society is how to find a way to reform positive common social goals which are not only limited to the optimisation of the education system.

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