THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This research addresses the importance of the preparation and continuous professional development of principals in the process of leading and implementing changes in primary schools. The aim of the research is to examine the perspectives of principals regarding their professional preparation, the need for ongoing training, and the significance of professional development in realizing school-based changes. The research employed a quantitative, descriptive approach, involving a sample of six primary school principals from the municipality of Tetovo and its surrounding area. A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument, and the data were processed and analyzed using the SPSS software, utilizing descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages. The results indicate that 83.3% of the principals fully agree that professional training contributes to strengthening intellectual and pedagogical competencies, as well as to the efficient implementation of changes within the school. Furthermore, all participants expressed a positive attitude toward the importance of continuous professional training. In conclusion, it can be stated that the professional development of school principals constitutes an important element of school leadership and the creation of a professional culture oriented toward change and the improvement of educational quality.

Keywords: professional preparation, school principal, professional development, school leadership, educational change, primary schools.

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid developments in society, globalization and the advancement of information technology, schools are constantly faced with new demands and challenges. These changes also require new ways of organizing and leading educational institutions. In this context, the school principal plays a significant role in creating the conditions for the development and improvement of school operations. Bush (2018) emphasizes that the principal is a key factor influencing the quality of educational activities within a school.

Changes in the educational system, curricular reforms, and the implementation of new teaching approaches require ongoing preparation and commitment from educational institutions. Alongside these developments, the understanding of the principal's role has also evolved; today, the principal is not viewed merely as the person responsible for school administration, but as a leader who must foster collaboration, support teachers, and steer processes of change. Implementing changes within a school requires sound planning, cooperation among stakeholders, and an understanding of the institution's specific needs. Therefore, the success of educational reforms depends not only on policies formulated at the central level but also on how they are implemented within school practice. In this regard, the OECD (2019) highlights the importance of school leadership in improving the quality and effectiveness of education.

To fulfill these responsibilities, school principals must possess appropriate professional preparation, as well as the knowledge and skills that enable them to address the daily challenges of leadership. Equally important is the opportunity for continuous learning and professional development while in office. The significance of these processes and their impact on school development are also addressed by Shepard (2022) and Beattie (2021).

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the implementation of reforms in primary education is a process that requires ongoing commitment from all educational institutions. The Concept for Primary Education (Bureau for the Development of Education, 2021) outlines the key

directions for the development of primary education, emphasizing the need to improve the educational process and enhance its quality. In this process, school principals bear significant responsibility for organizing and implementing changes within the schools they lead.
Given the importance of the principal's role in these processes, this paper examines the professional preparation of principals and its connection to the implementation of changes in primary schools. The research aims to explore principals' perspectives on their own professional preparation, the need for continuous development, and the significance of these factors in carrying out school-level changes. Through this research, the goal is to gain a better understanding of the extent to which professional preparation influences the work of principals and their ability to address the demands brought about by educational reforms.

2. Theoretical review of the paper

The Role, Functions, and Responsibilities of the School Principal

Being a school principal is a role that demands versatility and success in fulfilling one's obligations and duties. In times of change—whether desired, undesired, or even incomprehensible—the principal is expected to lead these transitions and contribute to the utmost of their ability toward resolving any challenges that arise (Musliu, L. S., 2017: 20). This implies that a principal must be committed to continuous professional development, as their knowledge, expertise, and skills are key to driving better outcomes within the school. Their primary objective is to provide professional leadership and management, with the aim of fostering school improvement and success. The principal's responsibilities are extensive, centered on creating an educational, motivating, creative, stimulating, and productive environment for both the teaching staff and the students. Specifically, as the professional leader of the school—working in conjunction with all entities operating within the institution—the principal is responsible for:

- Establishing and fulfilling the school's mission and vision, and setting its strategic direction.
- Correct interpretation of school legislation.
- Managing change and planning for the future of the school.
- Ensuring the school's success and improvement through self-evaluation.
- Ensuring high quality in teaching and student learning.
- Guaranteeing equal opportunities for all.
- Supporting the broader school community.
- Professional development for oneself and for all school staff. (Ceka, A., & Murati, Xh. 2017:83).

The Professional Preparation of the School Principal as a Factor in Leading School Change

Continuous changes within the education system—including curricular reforms, new teaching approaches, assessment methods, and inclusive practices—require schools to possess the capacity for adaptation and ongoing improvement. In this process, the school principal plays a pivotal role, as they are responsible for leading the institution, organizing its operations, and establishing the conditions necessary to implement changes within school practice. Consequently, the success of any reform depends not only on its content but also on how it is planned, communicated, and implemented within the school.
The professional preparation of a principal encompasses pedagogical and managerial knowledge, leadership and communication skills, familiarity with relevant legislation, and a

commitment to continuous professional development. These competencies enable the principal to make well-founded decisions, engage staff in change processes, and support the implementation of those changes. The importance of this aspect is highlighted by Shepard (2022), who, in her study involving school principals, identifies a link between professional learning and changes in knowledge, beliefs, and leadership practices. Similarly, Beattie (2021) underscores the significance of a shared vision and coordinated actions by principals during the implementation of reforms in primary schools. These findings suggest that a principal's professional development holds particular value when it is reflected in concrete leadership practice.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the responsibilities of educational institutions and their leaders are grounded in the legal framework for primary education, while the Concept for Primary Education (Bureau for the Development of Education, 2021) sets out guidelines for the development of the educational process, emphasizing inclusivity, the development of competencies, and the enhancement of teaching quality. Achieving these objectives requires professionally prepared principals capable of aligning reform requirements with the specific needs and circumstances of their schools. Furthermore, reports from the OECD (2019) and UNESCO-IIEP (2024) provide context regarding the challenges and needs of the country's education system. In this research, the effectiveness of implementing changes is understood through clear planning, communication with staff, the involvement of teachers, support during implementation, and the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. Karimi (2023), in an examination of educational leadership and primary school improvement, emphasizes the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility in school development processes. In this sense, the professional preparation of the school principal can be considered a significant factor linked to a school's capacity to implement changes in an organized and effective manner.

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of school principals' professional preparation on the efficient implementation of changes in primary schools.

Research Hypothesis:

H1: The professional preparation of school principals has a significant impact on the efficient implementation of changes in primary schools.

This research employed empirical methods, theoretical analysis, descriptive methods, and statistical methods. Empirical methods were used to collect data from primary school principals, while theoretical analysis was applied to examine relevant literature. Descriptive methods were utilized to describe and interpret the obtained results, and statistical methods were used to process and present the data through frequencies, percentages, tables, and graphs.

The population for this research consists of primary school principals in the Municipality of Tetovo and its surrounding areas. The research sample comprises 6 principals from 6 different primary schools, who participated in the study via a survey.

The research was conducted in the following schools:

1. Primary school "Përparimi" – village Great Recica
2. Primary school "Kirili and Metodij" – Tetovo
3. Primary school "NaimFrashëri" – Tetovo
4. Primary school "Liria" – Tetovo
5. Primary school "Istikball" – Tetovo
6. Primary school "BratstvoMigjeni" – Tetovo.

The research was quantitative, where a survey was used as a technique and a questionnaire was used as a measuring instrument. The SPSS program was used for data processing, comparison and presentation, where the research results are presented graphically and tabularly, expressed in percentages.

4. Analysis and interpretation of research results

Descriptive analysis

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire for directors

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Shkolla	6	1	2	1.17	.408
Gjinia	6	1	2	1.33	.516
Arsimimi	6	1	2	1.67	.516
Valid N (listwise)	6				

Table 2. Primary schools by residence for principals

Shkolla

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Qytet	5	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Fshat	1	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

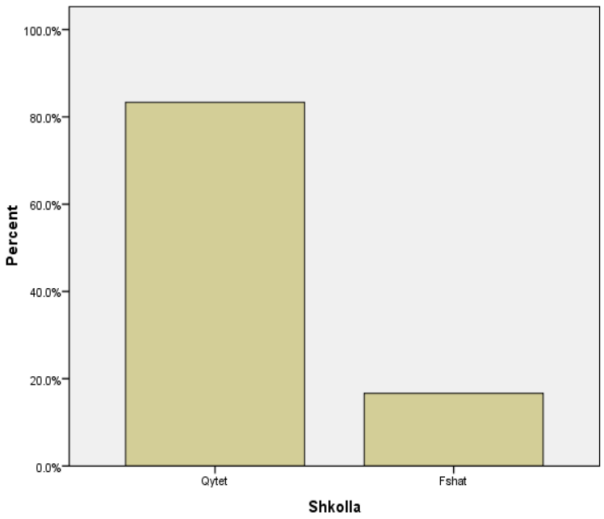


Fig.1 Primary schools by residence for principals

From Figure 1, we can see that the majority of primary school principals are based in urban areas; specifically, 5 principals (83.3%) are from urban areas, while 1 principal (16.7%) is from a rural area.

Table 3. Gender of primary school principals

Gjinia

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Mashkull	4	66.7	66.7	66.7
	Femër	2	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

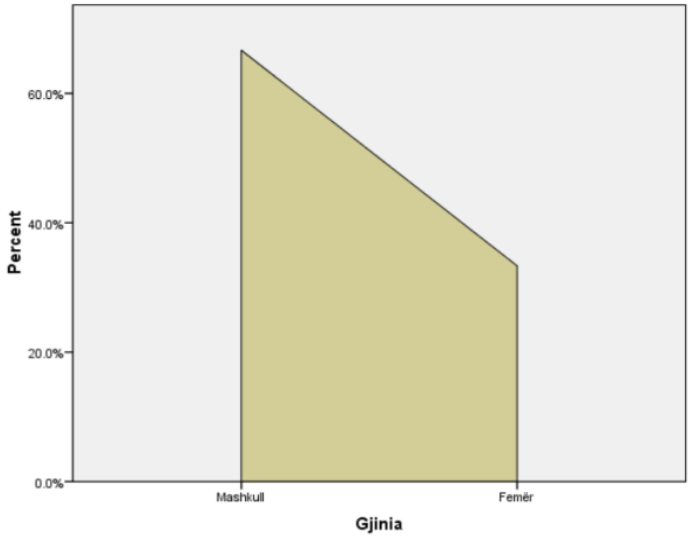


Fig. 2 Gender of primary school principals

In Figure 2, we can see that 4, or 66.7%, are male leaders, while 2, or 33.3%, are female leaders.

Table 4. Educational attainment of primary school principals

Arsimimi

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	E lartë	2	33.3	33.3	33.3
	Sipëror	4	66.7	66.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

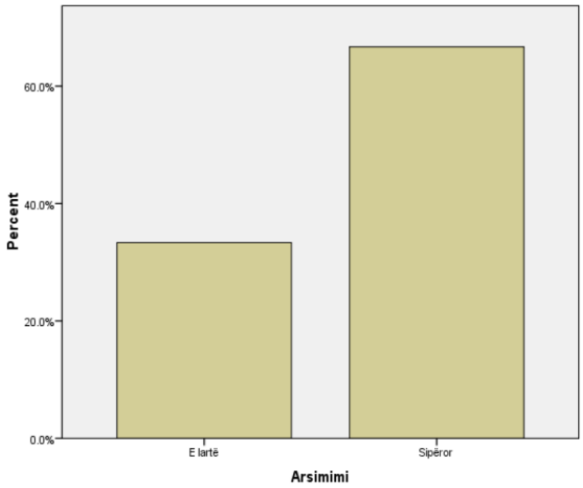


Fig. 3 Educational attainment of primary school principals

In Figure 3, we can see that 4 principals, or 66.7%, have completed higher education, while 2, or 33.3%, possess a higher education qualification.

Results from the survey questionnaire for primary school principals – Professional preparation of principals

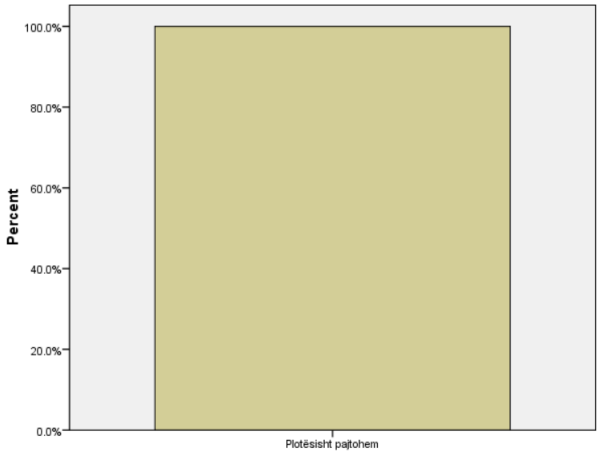


Fig.4 Survey question "With my appointment as director, I felt completely prepared professionally for the task I took on."

In Figure 4, we can observe that for the first question, 100% of the respondents indicated that they "fully agree."

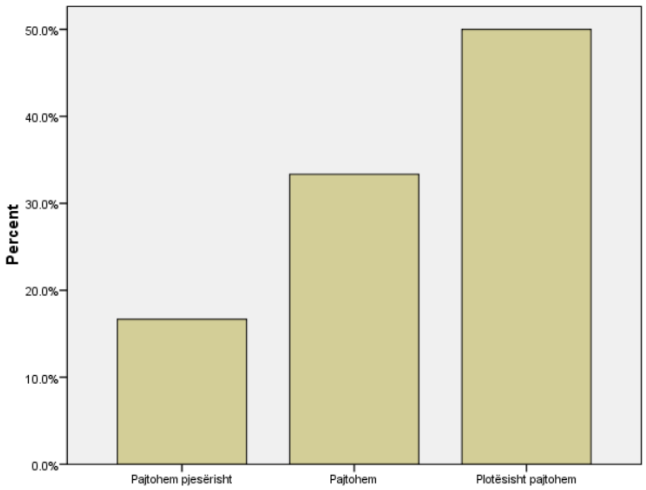


Fig. 5 Survey question: "I need to attend professional development training."

In Figure 5, regarding the second question, the results show that 16.7% of respondents partially agree, 33.3% agree, and 50.0% fully agree.

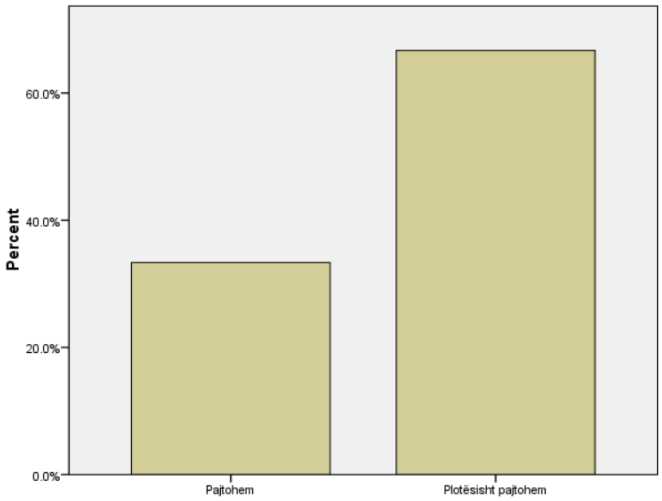


Fig. 6 Survey question: "Professional development training should be systematic and continuous, taking place every year."

In Figure 6, regarding the next question, we can see that 33.3% of respondents agree, and 66.7% completely agree.

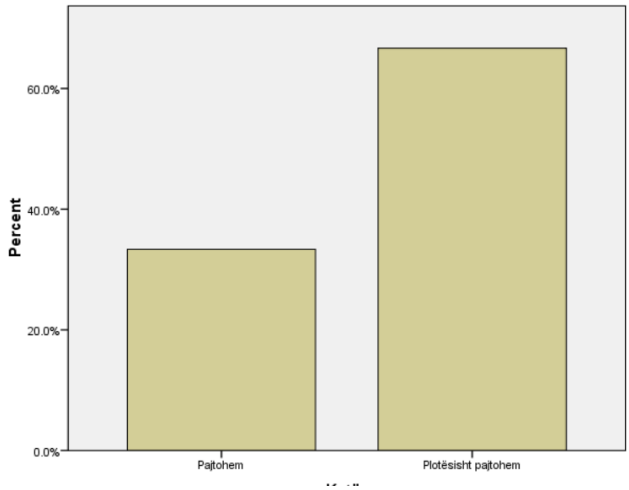


Fig. 7 Survey question: "Motivation is of particular importance in the professional development of a school principal, as it facilitates the development of self-improvement, which in turn leads to the resolution of various problems."

As shown in Figure 7, the respondents answered the question as follows: 33.3% agree, and 66.7% strongly agree.

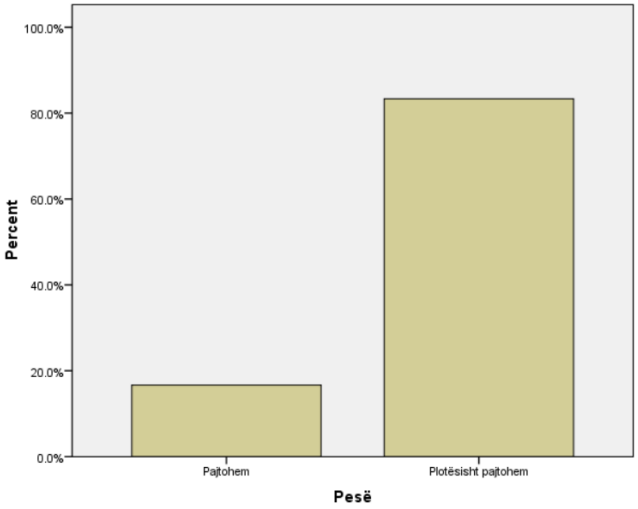


Fig. 8 Survey question: "Professional development training enables the strengthening of a school principal's intellectual and pedagogical competence."

In Figure 8, we obtained the following results from the survey question posed: 16.7% agree, and 83.3% strongly agree.

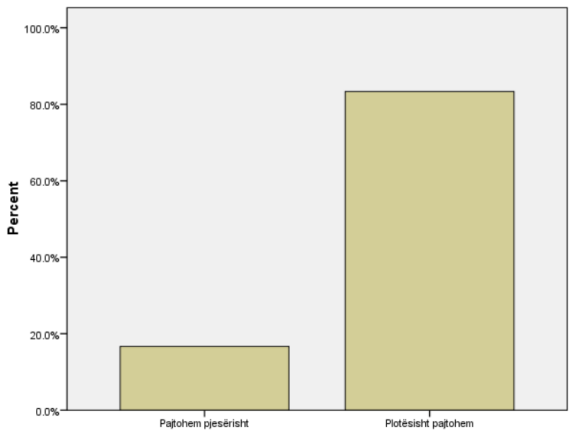


Fig. 9 Survey question: "The professional development of the school principal has a significant impact on the efficient implementation of changes within the school."

As shown in Figure 9, respondents answered the question as follows: 16.7% agree, and 83.3% strongly agree.

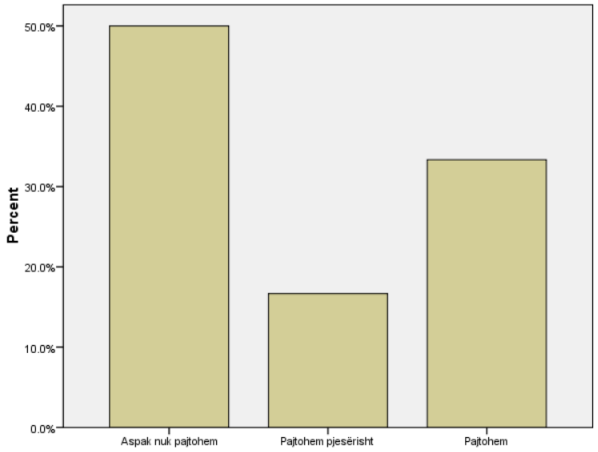


Fig. 10 Survey question: "I believe that principals should not constantly attend professional development training, but rather should do so every three years."

In Figure 10, we observe the following results from the respondents: 50.0% strongly disagree, 16.7% partially agree, and 33.3% agree.

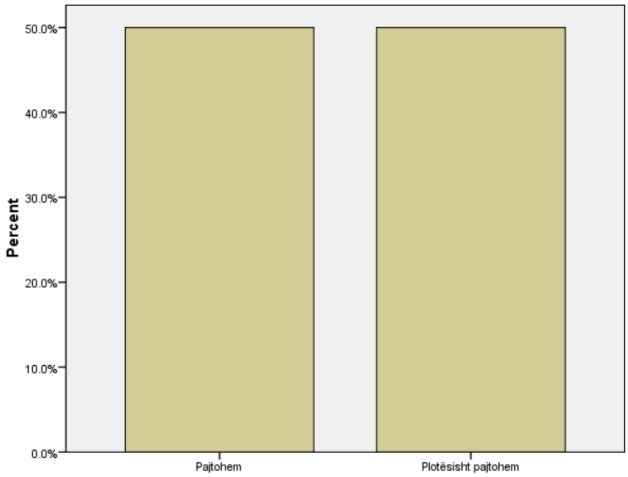


Fig. 11 Survey question: "Communicative competence is a personal quality of the director that is formed through the process of development and self-development."

As shown in Figure 11, the responses to this survey question indicate that 50% of the respondents agree, and 50% strongly agree.

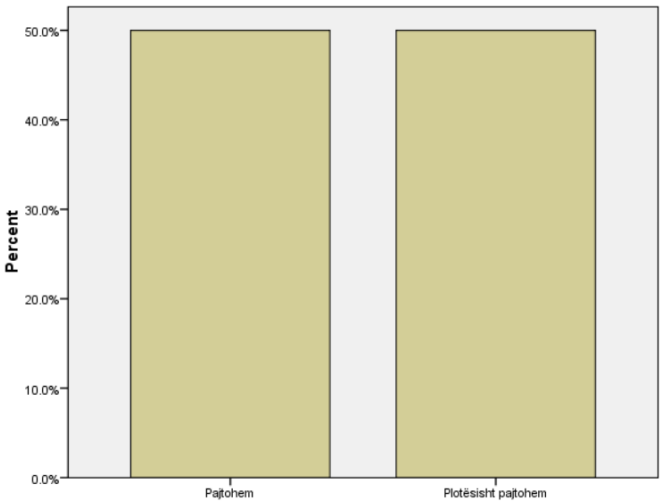


Fig. 12 Survey question: "The professional development of principals also fosters emotional stability, which is necessary when supporting employees through the process of change."

Figure 12 presents the responses to this survey question: 50% of respondents agree, and 50% strongly agree.

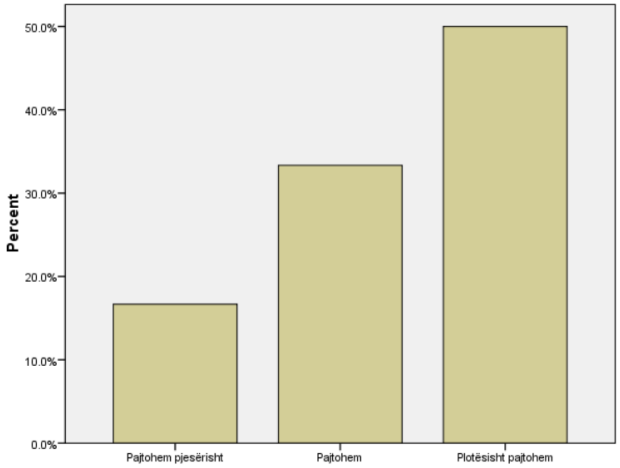


Fig. 13 Question 10 of the questionnaire: "Professional development enables the principal to create a professional culture, which is essential for achieving positive results."

In Figure 13, we observe the following results from the respondents: 16.7% partially agree, 33.3% agree, and 50.0% fully agree.

Regarding the first hypothesis—that the professional preparation of school principals significantly influences the efficient implementation of changes in primary schools—we examined several aspects: the extent of the principals' professional preparation; their need for professional development training; how a principal's professional development affects the efficient implementation of changes; and the role of such development in fostering a professional culture necessary for achieving positive outcomes. We concluded that the majority of the surveyed principals believe that participating in professional development training enables the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and work-related competencies, while also enhancing the professional culture—all with the aim of driving reforms and changes within

primary schools. Specifically, more than 83.3% of the surveyed principals hold this positive view and agree with the statement, while a small minority—approximately 16.7%—only partially agree. This indicates that, although to a limited extent, there are still principals in primary schools who do not fully embrace continuous and systematic professional development training.

4. Conclusions

Based on the research conducted, the data obtained, and their subsequent processing and analysis, we have reached conclusions regarding the issues under discussion.
Regarding the first hypothesis—which posits that the professional preparation of school principals significantly influences the efficient implementation of changes in primary schools—the results provide supporting evidence. From a managerial perspective, descriptive analyses indicate that the majority of surveyed principals (83.3%) fully agree that participating in training enables the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, thereby fostering a professional culture conducive to reform; the remaining 16.7% partially agree with this assertion.
Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that a principal's professional preparation and their inclusive approach toward the teaching staff are critical factors for effective management and the successful implementation of educational changes in primary schools.

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