THE VOICE OF EXTENDED PROFESSIONALS –
LEARNNG COMMUNITY MEMBERS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of teacher professionality in Macedonia. It arises from a FECI 'Step by Step' Macedonia initiative to develop school-based 'learning communities' in which all parties (teachers, students and school management) have an equal voice, trust one another, share a common vision and rely on personal agency for creating a positive change in the school. The learning communities is a component of the USAID 'Readers are Leaders' Project aiming to increase early-grade students' literacy and numeracy capacities. These activities draw on earlier work within the International Teacher Leadership initiative (Frost, 2011). A survey was sent to learning communities members (341) to respond to 12 themes which correspond to aspects of professional identity. The survey, developed by Education International and Leadership for Learning (Cambridge Network), consists of 20 pairs of statements, first statement asking participants to respond in relation to the actual state (what is), while the other asking them to respond about the desired state (what should be). This paper focuses on three of the twelve themes most related to areas of professional identity that have appeared in the open-ended portion of the survey: teachers' influence in policy and practice; choice and judgement in matters of pedagogy and school evaluation/inspection. The data gives insight into teachers' opinions about their current status, level of freedom and new education reform as an implied commentary of their professional identity. The discussion focuses on the learning communities initiative's potential to scaffold a lifelong learning culture among teachers based on extended professionalism and personal agency.

Keywords: *professional identity, extended professionalism, teacher effectiveness, learning communities, teacher leadership.*

It is a widely accepted that quality education is crucial for creating a vehicle for positive social change and nurturing responsible citizenship (Callan, 1997; Frost, 2011). When talking to teachers about how they feel about their profession, many of them have expressed that they love their profession, the very essence of it – connecting with children and educating the future responsible citizens – but that when it comes to their jobs as teachers in Macedonia and the region, they feel unappreciated, with increasingly narrowing areas of autonomy in their teaching practice, penalised for experimentation, with lowered self-efficacy beliefs and in a constant tug-of-war between education policy/politics and the reality of their contexts. In countries around the world efforts are focused on performing highly on international standardised tests (e.g. PISA, TIMMS) as they provide means of comparison between education systems. Governments often cherry-pick policies of high-performing countries on the assumption that these would enable them to meet targets providing only a 'procedural illusion of effectiveness' (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1998). When results are not being shown, the first that gets blamed are the teachers. This is not completely unjustified since, according to many international studies (OECD, 2005; TALIS, 2009), a significant factor shaping students' attainment is the effect of the teacher, which accounts for 30% of the variance (Hattie, 2002). Still, these tests, as well as the standardised

design of government inspections, provide very little, if any, feedback, about teaching quality, let alone teacher quality.

Teacher versus teaching quality and shaping teachers' professional identity

In essence the focus of this discussion is the distinction between a focus on the quality of teaching versus teacher quality. Teacher quality encompasses the qualities of good teaching such as subject mastery, pedagogical and didactical skills, but it also involves personal and contextual characteristics (Korthagen, 2004). The characteristics good teachers include confidence, commitment, trustworthiness, respect, analytical and conceptual thinking, the drive for constant improvement, information seeking initiative, flexibility, accountability and passion. This more holistic view of the matter has been defined by Hoyle (2008) as 'extended professionalism', as a desirable dimension of the professional identity of teachers. Arguably, there is a need for teachers to reclaim and re-define the teaching profession, first by nurturing a profile of teachers which not only implies good classroom teaching, but also commitment toward improving education for all through collaboration with colleagues, life-long professional development. (Joshevska, 2012)

Family and community involvement (ISSA, 2010) and personal agency in order to have teachers' voice considered about core aspects of education and thus improving education in ascending levels (classroom, school, system). This bottom-up approach is an essential part of the teacher leadership methodology as a means of creating a school-based infrastructure for continuous professional development and practice development (Bangs and Frost, 2011; 2012; Frost, 2011; 2012; 2014).

Teacher leadership based learning communities

For the Macedonian context the non-positional teacher leadership methodology which relies on personal agency, commitment and collaboration with colleagues, has also led to several other mind-set changes to answer the needs of the local context. Firstly, the platform which incorporates the teacher leadership concept, called a learning community, is school-based which reflects the idea of starting with small-scale interventions that improve the work within a classroom and school. Secondly, the networking events provide an opportunity for teachers to share positive practices and discuss education matters. Thirdly, teachers have an opportunity to acquire evidence-gathering and reflection skills as well as other skills necessary for being a competent educator for the 21st century (ISSA, 2010). Finally, the concept of shared knowledge and collective action contributes towards pulling teachers out of isolation, having a sense of ownership and improving self-efficacy and collective efficacy beliefs, arguably nurturing 'extended professionalism.

Methodology

In order to provide ideas about how to shape education polices around the world Education International[1] in cooperation with Leadership for Learning: The Cambridge Network[2] in cooperation with Cambridge University, Faculty of Education, have developed a survey intended for teachers, school management, support staff and other education professionals. This

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[1] https://www.ei-ie.org/
[2] https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/

survey for the current research was used to examine how teachers define aspects of their professional identity organized by the survey design in the twelve themes summarized in the table below.

Table 1 *Survey themes*

Teachers' leadership of innovation and development	School evaluation / inspection
Teachers' influence in policy and practice	Teachers' roles in assessment of pupils' learning
Choice and judgement in matters of pedagogy	Teacher performance assessment / appraisal
Leadership of continuing professional development	The creation of professional knowledge
Teachers' roles in curriculum development	Teachers' voice and influence
Responsibility for relationships and communication with parents	Strategies and policies that would enhance self-confidence and self-efficacy

Survey design

The survey consisted of 20 pairs of statements where respondents were asked to express a degree of agreement with the statement (1 – I don't agree at all; 4 – I completely agree). In one of the statements in the pair the participants had to respond to the actual situation in their context, while on the other they had to respond about what the desired state for that statement *should* be. A paired samples t-test of the scores of each pair of statements was conducted to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between what is the actuality of a situation and the desired situation with regards to presented statement. A summary of the statistical information along with the significant statistical differences is presented in Annex 1.

The survey included two open-ended questions *(What could increase your confidence and that you can have a positive impact on students' learning and their wellbeing?* and *What could policy makers, head teachers and administrators do to improve your professional confidence as a teacher?)* to provide additional insight into the factors that shape teachers' professional identity, what hinders it and what ideas teachers have to improve their professional status.

Sample

The online survey was sent to teachers belonging to professional learning communities as part of USAID Readers are Leaders Project[3] implemented by the Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" - Macedonia[4]. A total of 341 responses were sent back (312 Macedonian respondents and 29 Albanian respondents) The rationale for selecting learning communities' members rather than a random sample of teachers was the notion that learning communities nurture the favoured 'extended professionals' which are arguably the type of professionals we would want to discuss broader education issues and speak on the behalf of the teaching profession, professionals whose voice should be heard.

Results

Teachers' influence in policy and practice

This theme examines the perceived influence teachers have over policies and practices that affect their work as teachers. Specifically the statements are:
Teachers (should) have a professional freedom to choose their teaching approach. and *Teachers (should) decide for themselves which area of professional development they want to take part in.* The statistical significant difference between the statements suggests that participants believe that it is important to influence educational policies and practices in the schools, in the communities and on a national level. However the modalities of the expressed influence or how should the teachers be involved or exert influence is unclear. In other words, the specific examples of their influence about what kind of policies and practices teachers need to have a say in, needs to be explored further. The qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions might shed more light regarding this theme. Namely, many participants voice the need for a greater involvement from practitioners when policies are created, for policy creators to be more respectful of the teaching profession and for teachers to be rewarded accordingly.

"When they come up with changes, additions [to existing policies], *JUST ONCE, I wish they asked us, the practitioners, what kind of changes are necessary for quality education. They* [policy makers] *just pass laws and regulation and force the implementation of those laws and regulations on the teachers. "*

"They [policy makers] *should simply show respect by consulting us about different reforms they want to bring…just choosing the input of a few self-proclaimed experts who make decisions on our* [teachers'] *behalf without talking to us first."*

"We could be motivated more through recognition and rewards for achieved results and opportunities for career promotions."

Teachers' roles in curriculum development

Similar to the previous theme, teachers here were asked about their involvement in the curriculum development in their schools. The statements examining this theme are: *Teachers are/should be involved in curriculum development in their schools.* and *Teachers (should) develop curricular content in cooperation with their colleagues.* The significant statistical

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[3] https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/readers-are-leaders-pro
[4] http://www.stepbystep.org.mk/mk/proekt-ral

difference between the real and desired state, indicates that the collaborative work in curriculum development on school level is an important aspect of how teachers define their role as teachers and thus their professional identity.

When it comes to in-class curriculum modification allowed to teachers, there is much left to be desired. The national curriculum allows for very little possibility to adapt or modify the curriculum. The State Education Inspectorate follows a protocol when assessing teaching quality which prescribes goals as well as content through which these goals will be achieved. There are two quality indicators which allow for some flexibility in planning, specifically regarding options to integrate aspect of environmental awareness and multiculturalism (1.1 Implementation of teaching plan and program and 1.2 Quality of teaching plans and programs), however that is where flexibility on content and goal setting for teachers stops. Furthermore, requirements such as the mandatory use of ICT in the classroom and the problematic implementation of a new math and science curriculum introduced in 2013[5], commonly referred by teachers as the Cambridge Program, has contributed to an increasing confusion about their tasks and roles, and doubt in their capacities to fulfil such rigid demands. Consequently teachers express a need to have more freedom to choose and adapt to meet students' needs. This is indicated in the qualitative data as well.

"I think that I can get close to students, to guide their way of thinking toward a problem-solving thinking and by allowing them to experiment and make mistakes, I think I can have a good impact on them."

"The freedom is in planning and conducting of the curriculum. The new programs and guidelines for achieving the set goals are very restrictive and they don't allow for some activities that might suit students' needs better."

The qualitative data suggest that teachers seek more freedom in this area, especially when it comes to choosing contents, methods and teaching strategies to achieve the outlined goals, as it was previously discussed, but their freedom to do so is hindered by bureaucratization of their work, lack of proper classroom resources and externally imposed accountability demands (i.e. external evaluation to assess teaching quality).

"The teacher should be the creator in the classroom and not to be burdened with the pressures of the administration and work protocols."

"We need space and time to dedicate our work to the children, not on collecting evidence and photographing the classroom/activities so we can show them when inspectors come."

"I don't believe in daily planning, I think that without them the teacher will use their freedom and creativity and experience to conduct a better class. The constant visits by the inspectors is unnecessary and disruptive. They are under orders to monitor irrelevant aspects of the class and the teaching, while those important things such as the activity, students' achievements and atmosphere in the classroom is not paid attention to."

School evaluation/inspection

The most profound difference between actual and desired situation found in this research is on the matter of involving teachers into the process of creation of criteria for external evaluation/inspection of schools. The statements used to examine this theme are*: Teachers are/should be asked for an opinion when external evaluation/school inspection is conducted in*

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[5] http://bro.gov.mk/?q=mk/node/163

the schools and *Relevant institutions (should) conduct external evaluation/inspections in the schools.*

Unsurprisingly, falling into the same trend of many education systems in many countries, there is a deep concern among teachers about the method of the evaluation of their competencies and the relevance of this data for their improvement. To provide a little bit of context, in 2012 a new government legislative was implemented as a state-wide practice for students are to be tested in all subjects (from grade 3 through 4th year in secondary school) predominantly to evaluate teachers' objectivity when grading students. Lower primary school teachers (grades 1-3) are more comprehensively evaluated, based on students' portfolios and instruments used to tests students' knowledge; however, from grade 4 onwards, 30 multiple choice item tests for most subjects are used for a sample of students (in 2013, 200 000 students were tested[6]). Significant discrepancies between the teacher assigned grade and the one obtain on the state test by the students, resulted in penalties for teachers. As this is viewed as a damaging practice to teachers and an even bigger dampening of their already constricting area of control, the majority of the teachers express a negative attitude toward this situation, which is further elaborated by the qualitative data.

"…There is no need for this kind of external evaluation because it contributes toward unrealistic grading of students and 'teaching for the test'."

"They need to abolish the penalties that result from the external testing…they leave out the processes needed for improvement and development."

"The external testing has become a successful farce…[inspectors/authorities] *need to stop thinking that you can show up to a teachers' classroom unannounced and they need to revoke the law that allows them to 'torment' teachers this way. Instead they need to find a method of control that will contribute toward teachers' improvement not punishment!"*

"I think relieving teachers of the burden of external testing as a method of 'control' over the teacher and the way they form a grade for the student would be the key element of 'relaxing' the general atmosphere in the schools."

In conclusion even though teachers generally agree that an external (impartial) institution should be in charge of teaching quality control, teachers object to the thusly implemented evaluation for several reasons. First, the manner in which it is conducted is reductionist and with prominent methodological flaws. Currently teachers' evaluations are used mainly to punish 'bad' teachers which causes tensions, revolt and reluctance to innovate and experiment. But perhaps the most profound issue with the currently conducted external evaluation, is that it provides no information or guidance for improving teaching quality, which is arguably what a school inspection/evaluation is supposed to do.

Discussion

Macedonian education follows a world-wide trend of reducing education quality to a few measurable characteristics, pretentiously defined as 'knowledge and skill', claiming to be dogmatic predictors of both students' success and teaching quality. Teacher effectiveness research, has proved less than useful for the purpose of examining the process of teaching, and the selection, preparation and professional development of teachers. Furthermore, the effects of standardised tests on the local level within a country, have put into motion various mechanisms of control over the education process, effectively transforming the results into instruments

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[6] https://www.scribd.com/doc/142775547/Priracnik-za-eksterno-ocenuvanje

of punishment for the teachers who are seen as most responsible for perceived failures (Neil, *et al.*).

Needless to say, this practice has faced a lot of criticism primarily due to its methodological naivety, and because its intent to weed out 'bad teachers' has actually made 'good teachers', as the current research has shown bitter, scared and ultimately dissatisfied with their profession, dampening the already diluted sense of professional identity among teachers. Arguably, what is needed instead is a more comprehensive teacher quality definition which encompasses more than what can be grasped even through the most sophisticated tests, a more holistic approach toward selecting, educating new teachers as well as nurturing 'extended professionals' who turn inward when searching for solutions for classroom practices and strive to improve education quality that goes beyond the narrowed role of the teacher. This is not to say that governments are therefore excused from providing the best conditions for creating an intellectually strong professional body and providing decent and dignified working conditions for their teachers; it implies that government policy should empower good teachers, give them freedom to lead and develop the teaching and educating process and protect them from potentially damaging external influences that makes mere implementers of prescribed policies out of teachers.

One of the ways in which such a paradigm shift can be achieved is through the bottom-up, non-positional approach in leading small-scale interventions as the backbone of teachers' continuous professional development. Shifting the focus from compartmentalized, immediate-need-only based training in which each teacher is for themselves, into nurturing a culture of learning in the schools which is established and maintained by teachers' themselves as experts of their context and experience and is actively supported and valued by school management. Arguably this kind of a model, although more difficult to measure in the positivistic sense favoured by education authorities assigned by governments, will provide a greater sense of a (professional) community in the schools, tailor-made solutions, a research and documentation practice among the teachers and an amplified sense of moral purpose which has pushed into dormancy due to the culture of control and accountability demands. On a personal level, teachers' role would be meaningfully broadened (contrary to the roles of administrators and implementers overwhelming teachers) thus providing a more diverse professional experience and sense of purpose and hopefully a retrieval of the memory of why they became teachers in the first place.

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