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Understanding the context of teacher professionalism in education systems undergoing transition – Kosovo case

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines teacher professionalism in Kosovo in light of its rapidly developing education system. The study involves 14 teachers at the beginning of their careers (1-7 years of experience) examining teacher thinking against the evolving stages of teacher professionalism, namely pre-professionalism, autonomous professionalism, collegial professionalism and post-professionalism. The study reveals that Kosovo teachers reflect strong dominance of pre-professionalism and autonomous professionalism while they demonstrate a weaker reflection of collegial and post-professional aspects of teachers' work. It provides insights for viewing teacher professionalism within a contextual frame including dimensions such as education context, historical as well as cultural background elements. The study concludes that changing teaching and learning practices in an evolving education system requires a culture of addressing external demands placed on teachers' work, processes that enable teachers to understand their role and expectations through developing communities of practice and collegiality.

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Key words: teacher professionalism; contextual factors; historical background; social being, collegiality

1. Introduction

Teacher professionalism is defined as teachers' responsibilities to control and develop their own knowledge and actions for the benefit of the clients (Webb et al., 2004). This knowledge development and actions normally would derive as a consequence of pressures be it from policies or other forms of pressure such as community requirements and overall trends of societal developments. Educational systems around the world have been

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subject to similar influences resulting from global changes and innovations (Webb et al., 2004). Such influences lead inevitably to changes in teachers' roles in certain educational systems or to expectations that societies raise for teachers in light of reflecting these global influences into local policies and practices.

One way of viewing teacher professionalism can be from the development perspectives. Hargreaves (2000) viewed teacher professionalism based on the teacher response to the demands of the profession over different time periods. Hargreaves (2000) argues in favor of four ages of teacher professionalism: **the age of pre-professionalism** (teaching as a technical simple craft of lecturing and recitation type of teaching with teachers who master the subject matter well); **the age of autonomous professional** (teaching being a matter of judgment and choice and to decide what is best for their students); **the age of collegial professional** (teachers and teaching involved in consultation, collaboration and collective efforts in the organization), and the **age of post-professionalism** (teachers and teaching engaged with the parents and wider community/responding to external demands). In light of this context, teacher professionalism should be seen as a still developing phenomenon in order to respond to best meeting the needs of the schools and students and a particular important element is to look at how the feature of these ages interrelate and respond to one another in different contexts.

1.1 Kosovo Education context

The Republic of Kosova has a territory of 10,908 square kilometres and is located centrally in the Balkan Peninsula. Kosova has more than 2 million inhabitants and about 60 percent of the population is under age 25 (UNDP 2006). Its population is multiethnic with 92 percent Albanian and 8 percent Serbs, Turkish, Roma, and other ethnic groups (Vula and Saqipi, 2009).

Like all the other segments of life in Kosovo, education links with historical and political developments. Kosovo belonged to the former Yugoslav Republic and was unavoidably influenced by political developments in the last two decades. The then Serbian regime had banned education for the majority (Albanian) population in Kosovo in 1990 which continued until 1999. As an alternative, Albanians established a separate 'parallel' education system financed by the Kosovo Albanian Diaspora. Private houses served as school and university facilities. Understandably, due to the circumstances and conditions in which teaching and learning was taking place, the quality of teaching and learning was significantly lower than normally possible. Teachers were working with a minimum and to no pay, classes were large and resources very limited. In addition, the political situation was not favourable for normal living conditions, and operating such an education system was deemed illegal by the then Serbian regime. As such, it was also a dangerous activity to be involved in be it as administrator, academic, or a student. The 'parallel' system ran until 1999 when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened to stop the repression of the Serb regime and gave way to establishing law and order where peace prevails. Education in Kosovo in the 90s was viewed as an instrument for maintaining a national identity and the spirit of struggling for survival. It was one of the key tools for, in addition to educating young generations, ensuring social cohesion and commitment towards making Kosovo a peaceful and democratic country.

Thus, the year 1999 marked an important point in the history of education in Kosovo. Violent circumstances ended, people were returning to their homes while NATO troops were marching in the country. Similarly, staff and students were returning to their old school buildings. Hope for a better quality education for all Kosovar students was restored. The emergency phase was soon over and Kosovo was established as an international protectorate under the United Nations (UN) governance. Under such circumstances, the education system required to be re-designed. It was aimed to support the development of a multicultural society and a peaceful country where members of all communities would co-exist peacefully and in harmony following a long dispute and difficult relations between certain communities.

Along with the gradual transfer of education competencies to local authorities, international partners active in the development of post-conflict state, supported Kosovo in designing a National Curriculum Framework in 2001 as a tool to shape teaching and learning practices in schools. This move was a major development in the education

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