Developing Learning Communities in Macedonia:
Can Teacher Leadership Save the Teaching Profession?

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the development of teacher professionality in Macedonia. It arises from a recent initiative by 'Step by Step', an NGO which aims to develop '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 activities is a component of the US AID funded 'Readers are Leaders' which goal is to increase early-grade students' literacy and numeracy capacities. The learning communities' activity draws on earlier work within the International Teacher Leadership initiative (Frost, 2011). Selected mentors with experience in teachers' professional development, provide support and guidance to help establish or invigorate existing learning communities so that a constructive dialogue about quality practice and the teaching profession in general can be facilitated. In this process the teachers define and conduct individual development projects that target students' literacy and numeracy capabilities. However, the ultimate goal of these activities is to scaffold the creation of a culture of lifelong learning in the schools, which will become a self-sustained system that safeguards teachers' professionalism, fosters self-efficacy and agency. The paper includes a discussion about the effectiveness of such strategies for nurturing extended professionalism (Hoyle, 2008). Data drawn from the monitoring process and teachers' development projects is analysed following the initial development phase (6 months) in order to judge the extent to which the initiative has the potential to scaffold the creation of a culture of lifelong learning in the schools and develop a self-sustained system that safeguards teachers' professionalism, fosters self-efficacy and agency.

Key words: *extended professionalism, professional identity, teacher leadership, learning communities*

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). 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. Toward this end, governments often cherry-pick policies of high-performing countries on the assumption that these would enable them to meet targets and 'show results' in the form of a higher ranking compared to other countries. Instead what this practice provides governments with is a 'procedural illusion of effectiveness' (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1998). When it comes to looking into the reasons for unsatisfactory results, policy makers often blame 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 effectiveness research, which measures teachers' success through students' attainment, 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 of punishment for the teachers who are seen as most responsible for perceived failures. For example, in Macedonia, the government installed a practice of 'external testing' in 2013 in which all students are externally assessed at the end of the school year. The aim of the practice was to verify whether teachers had objectively marked their students. Large discrepancies between grades lead to teachers receiving various punishments – from having to go through extra training, to having a pay cut. 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' bitter, scared and ultimately dissatisfied with their profession.

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 – educating and connecting with children – 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. This combined with the pre-service education of Macedonian teachers to comply with the ever-diversifying nature of society and the paradox of governments trying to achieve uniform education outcomes, leaves teachers poorly prepared to face the challenges of a modern, multicultural classroom.

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 those such as confidence, commitment, trustworthiness, respect, analytical and conceptual thinking, the drive for constant improvement, information seeking initiative, flexibility, accountability and passion. This provides a more holistic view of the matter which Hoyle (2008) has defined 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) and cooperation with families and communities (ISSA, 2010). A key component in the identity of teacher quality is that it is constructed in collaboration with colleagues and other relevant factors and personal agency toward having teachers' voice taken into consideration 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).

How can teacher leadership nurture an extended professional identity?

The non-positional approach to teacher leadership means an expansion of an existing role of the teacher because it relies on the belief that each teacher has a capacity to lead change (Frost, 2014). What this means is that interventions in the teaching and learning process should be a deliberate action on the part of the teacher who has identified an issue, collaborated with relevant colleagues and designed a plan in order to initiate a positive change in their domain of influence. Having this in mind, it is reasonable to talk about teacher leadership as a method to create extended professionals, primarily because it relies on personal agency, commitment, and collaborating with others for greater impact. In this way, teacher leadership entails a different kind of 'professionality' (Evans, 2008) which determines the personal perception of the teacher as a professional, their confidence about what is within their reach, how broadly they are committed to continuous professional development and whether they stop being a teacher once they leave the classroom.

For the Macedonian context the non-positional teacher leadership methodology 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 their stories and to celebrate their successes, a part of the job as a teacher that has been characterised as lacking. 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 characteristic of this approach contributes towards pulling teachers out of isolation, having a sense of ownership and improving self-efficacy and collective efficacy beliefs.

What have we done so far?

In the period 2010-2012 teacher leadership was introduced to Macedonia as part of the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative, incorporated in the USAID Primary Education Project (Frost, 2011). At the time there were eight schools and around 90 teachers that were involved. The schools were visited monthly for 8 months by a Support Team, consisting of an Education Coordinator from the Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" – Macedonia (FECI Step by Step) and an Education Advisor from the Bureau of Education Development (BDE), which is an organ of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Macedonia. The support sessions in the schools differed from one another. The development of teachers' interests, learning and proactive attitudes from the first to the last session was evident. The sessions at the beginning were more concerned with explaining the concept of the project and its philosophy; later on the sessions became more oriented toward the specific school team - analysing the needs of the teachers, making them aware of the benefit of this way of organising professional development and explaining the use of individual tools from the Tutors' Guide in their practice. Teachers' portfolios include the completed tools and instruments, commentaries made by their colleagues, notes from consultations, student's products, completed assignments required by the ITL activities and other artefacts. The Support Teams were very successful in explaining the importance of evidence/record keeping of their work. By forming a habit of gathering evidence the teachers have had more than just verbal validation of their hard work and successes. Based on gathered stories from teachers and Support Teams' reports, the most important achievements of ITL in Macedonia can be summarised in the following way:

- the establishing of school-based learning communities

- enhanced professionality and the strengthening of school learning cultures

- a sense of ownership and increased self-efficacy beliefs

These activities and results have been very encouraging for the expansion of the project. It became apparent that for every future initiative or reform in the education system especially

pertaining to teaching, there is a need for a functioning learning community of teachers within the school in which the legacy of trainings, seminars, workshops and other forms of professional development will be absorbed, practiced, modified and embedded in the specific context of the school.

What are we doing now?

The project in which the teacher leadership strategy has been used is the USAID funded 'Readers are Leaders' project (RAL) which focuses on improving early-grade students' literacy and numeracy skills. At the moment there are 42 schools across Macedonia that have taken part in the activities and an additional 20 schools will become part of the project by October, 2015, which is the second step towards involving all primary schools in Macedonia (around 360) by the end of 2015 – beginning of 2016. The initial 42 schools have been assigned mentors, these are professionals from different domains of the education system: experienced primary school teachers, school pedagogues, principals, University professors, education inspectors and other education professionals. The learning communities have monthly meetings with their mentors who support them in their work. So far, there have been 2 meetings (April – May, June – July, 2015), the first of which focused around explaining the concept and purpose of the learning community, acquainting the members with the mentor, setting the pace of work, voicing teachers' interests, concerns and expectations from these activities; the second meeting focused around a discussion of challenges in teaching literacy and numeracy to early-grade students, that teachers would like to focus on in the next academic year (2015-2016). This resulted in a list of development projects for which the teachers have developed action plans that will guide their development work this year. The overall goal of the learning community is to provide a safe space for professional dialogue which tackles the most important issues that the school deals with. These are communities built on respect for one another, trust, shared vision, and commitment to life-long learning and promoting positive change. We realise, that this may be far beyond the reach of one several-year-long initiative, and that changing peoples' mind-sets is extremely difficult, especially in a politically convoluted society as is the case in Macedonia. Nevertheless, we believe that the structure we have provided is a connective tissue between much training and school practice, a good basis for localised professional development in schools which makes it more sustainable. The activities are just getting started, but we have analysed reports from mentors and occasional discussions with teachers about how they perceive these activities, especially those for which the teacher leadership based learning community is a completely new concept.

Individual development projects

Teachers have chosen to work on development projects on their own, with some guidance from their mentor. As previously mentioned, the projects focus on the literacy and numeracy skills of students in grades 1-5 (6-10 years old). According to the mentors' reports, quite a few of the teachers involved were uneasy about working on something like this individually. In reality this is rather understandable: the task is to define a classroom problem, devise a plan of intervention, carry it out and evaluate it. Many of the teachers that have taken part in this project have never been in a situation where they could carry out this kind of project – one that relies primarily on teacher's agency and thus is a personal endeavour. Furthermore, the tools and instruments that they were introduced to by the mentors, were perceived as ambiguous by some teachers, for they are not in the strict, almost claustrophobic format of reporting teachers' are accustomed to. In other words, it has been quite a challenge to convey to teachers the importance of working on their own project. Engaging in an individual project that a teacher has chosen based on its importance in their practice, ensures maximum commitment. Additionally, asking teachers to express their achievements, struggles, worries in a first-person narrative, was done for the same purpose, as it symbolizes the personal commitment of the teacher to that specific topic.

Establishing evidence-gathering habits and compiling a development portfolio

One of the first comments teachers have made when mentors have explained the concept of the learning community organized in this manner and what is expected of them is "But we already do this…". This kind of statement is symptomatic of a situation where many Macedonian teachers have been exposed to the point of saturation to separate training but without adequate embedding of new practices in the school. Moreover, due to a lack of the necessary skills, teachers' often come short when asked to provide evidence of the results of their projects in the classroom. This does not necessarily require the rigor of academia or proof of objectivity, reliability and validity, but small-scale data collection integrated into the development projects. Mentors' reports suggest that this is probably the most challenging aspect of supporting a learning community: evidence gathering even for classroom inquiry requires skill, time and persistence by teachers who are already overwhelmed by countless tasks that require keeping records and ticking boxes. However, according to several teachers who have been part of the ITL initiative, the best argument in favour of having a development portfolio is that it shortens the time for planning the next time around, it helps teachers organise their intervention and it provides a means of comparison and communication with other teachers. But what is even more important is that documenting an intervention that a teacher has undertaken in a classroom undeniably informs the teacher about their reasoning and learning process, which is a key to any kind of professional development.

Strengthening reflection and metacognition of teachers' learning

Reflection of one's own learning process is one of those skills we all think we practice regularly and that it comes naturally to teachers. In reality reflection, or being a critical observer of one's own process of acquiring knowledge, even though a capacity which everyone possesses, is still a skill that can be taught and mastered (Livingston, 1997). In reality, when attempting to examine the extent to which teachers understand how they learn, what they know or do not know, how much of what they know they believe they are able to apply and adapt to suit their own learning needs and the demands of their professional context (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995), we have learned that there is still something to be desired. Reflection is often superficial, and only used incidentally when revising plans or taking future actions. However, this situation only mirrors the existing problems in education on all levels with regard to critical thinking and metacognition. This means that reflection is a crucial part of being a life-long learner, a profile we strive for when educating children and one we should strive for also when educating educators. In the learning communities in this project, as support visits become less plenary and more working groups where individual teachers discuss their ongoing projects with mentors and colleagues, critical thinking and feedback is what makes these meetings more than standard presentations of activities and achievements and leads to them becoming opportunities to share and learn from each other through the prism of a shared vision. However, good practices should expand from school-success to something to be shared with other teachers outside of one's school. The networking events planned within this project are intended to provide an opportunity for teachers to share their accomplishments with peers from other schools and thus broaden the network.

Networking events and Teacher champions

The networking events are intended to continue the dialogue about good pedagogical practices, to tackle challenges of the profession and status of the teacher. We have planned two types of networking events to take place, the first type being more local where the learning communities of two neighbouring schools will be merged (one will be the host and the other guest). The mentors will develop a proposed agenda with the learning communities for activities that aim to achieve 3 goals:

a) to present both learning communities' projects and their current progress (poster presentations, power point presentations, simulations, fair-type exhibitions, etc.);

b) to discuss projects development, challenges and share ideas: the mentors will facilitate the discussion using various discussion tools ;

c) to promote Teacher Champions

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Each learning community, in collaboration with the mentor, will have a chance to nominate Teacher Champions based on previously defined criteria (initiative, commitment, scholarship, project development, techniques used, inspiring other colleagues, reflection, presentation, originality etc.) in a competition which will result in a special type of a certificate and an award. Teacher Champions will be expected to become mentors of their learning communities in the future.

The second type of networking events will be regional and they will be held for a select group of members of the learning community. The goal for these events will still to some extent incorporate the previously mentioned goals, adding a more formal quality to the event to promote the visibility of the work of the learning communities in the general public. These four events which are planned by the end of the project will provide not only an opportunity for schools to connect with other schools, but present their schools and teachers' project to other organisations, local government representatives, parents, and other members of the community. The purpose of the regional networking events will be a celebration of achievements and acknowledgement of teachers' hard work, in an endeavour to motivate teachers to create a tradition of sharing and promoting their successes to their peers, but also to the public.

Final remarks

The circumstances that define the demands of being a productive and socially engaged individual in today's society, also express a need for changes in the education system and the way good teachers are developed. We initially argued that the trend of using students' attainment to evaluate teachers is reductionist and has other methodological flaws (Wrigley, 2004) and it focuses solely on the teaching competencies of teachers. These are of course essential to being successful in any profession, but this approach provides very little useful information about how to select, train and continuously develop good teachers. Numerous studies have produced extensive lists of competencies and personal characteristics of quality teaching, they have been generally accepted with little contest. However, due to the unique nature of the teaching profession as it relies on moral purpose and responsibility (Korthagen, 2004), there is a need for a more holistic approach concept of what it means to be a good teacher. The quality of a teacher goes beyond subject mastery, didactical and pedagogical competencies; it incorporates a drive for action, vigour for life-long learning, promoting positive change beyond the doors of one's classroom or school and an implicit conviction in the value and responsibility they have as teachers (moral purpose). In other words what we believe in is nurturing an identity of teachers which closely resembles Hoyle's 'extended professional' (2008). The concept of teacher leadership as a philosophy that every teacher has the capacity to lead positive change (Frost, 2014) reflects these values and therefore we have conducted the work in the USAID RAL project using it as a key principle. As a methodology, teacher leadership provides structure through

meetings, mentorship, defining classroom/school challenges, evidence gathering and documentation, networking meetings and so on, but also the freedom to choose, conduct, engage and use all resources that the teachers' think are necessary not only to create a positive change in their classroom, but to exert influence on a larger scale. Furthermore, creating networks of teachers with this mind-set, who actively seek ways to improve and upscale the status of the teaching profession and are constantly engaged in activities for professional improvement, can arguably set into motion a more global debate about the redefinition of the teaching profession. Practitioners' opinions about what needs to be done within a profession are often in tension with reforms imposed by policy makers and there is no better way to find out if an intervention is working then asking those that are affected by it. In any case, regardless of how the profession needs to be redefined, saved or otherwise changed, in doing so, we need to hear what teachers have to say.

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