Challenges and opportunities of school-based professional development in a decentralizing system

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Abstract

This study addresses forms of in-service teacher professional development implemented in Kosovo schools during the last decade and efforts to ensure sustainability of teacher professional development in Kosovo circumstances. The Kosovo education system is characterized by its dynamic structure. Program developments to reform the system, in particular in the context of devolution have implications for professional development from central education authorities to municipalities and schools. In this context Kosovo saw also start of implementation of the school based professional development. As a new approach it involves a number of challenges and opprotunities for building a sustainable system of professional development that views professional development as a continuous personal development as compared to the formal approach of seminar type. Data for this study have been provided through a questionnaire with 1500 teachers from 18 (out of 36) Kosovo municipalities and a case study in one school in Kosovo, which was involved traditional PD provision, but has also made significant efforts towards school based professional development in the last two years. Findings of this study have been interpreted against the working context of Kosovo teachers – a system oriented towards regulation and standardization. The study confirms the potential for sustainability in school-based PD, and calls for systematic efforts in addressing challenges in order to allow for building of a new school culture oriented towards organizational development.

Introduction

Kosova has an important experience in the provision of teacher professional development in the period of post 1999. Following the end of war in 1999, Kosova secured international support in enhancing teaching and learning in schools which was seen as an instrument for societal development and cohesion within the process of wider European family integration. A number of projects financed by donors starting from 2000 have been supporting the education system in Kosova towards developing the teacher skills that would develop learner centered teaching environment and culture.

Being seen as an emergent approach, teacher professional development in the period

of 2000 – 2008 was offered only through the cascade model or centralized workshops (be it at national or municipal level). This has created a culture of perceiving professional development as a workshop or seminar with the communication being developed more or less in one direction.

After 2008, along with the decentralization of education competencies towards municipal level (Law on Municipal Education in the Republic of Kosovo), the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology started to work on developing models of professional development which are closer to the school and to the work with children in the classroom allowing teachers easier access to professional development.

The context of the study

Teachers in general obtain most of the knowledge during interactions with a variety of systems. This knowledge is then turned into practical knowledge to meet the practical and contextual demands of teaching (Gholami et al, 2010).

The results of latest research show that teachers learn from self-initiated activities in their workplace, which enable them to develop meaning. Unlike many studies related to student learning in the context of thinking activities, teacher learning very often is perceived in the context of their activities in their work place (Meirink et al, 2009).

Personal and school context factors are decisive in the development of sustainability of commitment of teachers to teaching (Day et al, 2005).
Examples of the school context factors that make teacher commitment sustainable include:

- Exchange of ideas and collegial support;
- Positive feedback form the colleagues;
- Working with parents to implement change;
- Shared educational values in school;
- Students in the class and dynamic work environment (Day et al, 2005).

According to Meirink, current teacher professional development programs are situated in the workplace and in this way offer good oportunities for different learning activities. Such a program of professional developmet includes cooperation of teachers in teams which is usually considered as something that creates a powerful environment for teacher learning.

Different studies have identified five general categories of learning: (1) doing; (2) experimenting; (3) reflecting on practice; (4) learning from others without interaction, and (5) learning from others with interaction (Meirink, Meijer and Verloop 2007 as cited by Meirink 2009).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is the review of teacher professional development system as a system that is undergoing important transformations – in the new state of Kosovo. The paper is focused on aspects of decentralization of teacher professional development from central to municipal level and further to school level in an education system that is oriented towards standardization and a top-down school culture.

The paper studies the effects, challenges and opportunities of implementing professional development in a school-based model. Kosovo's experience in implementing school based professional development is quite recent and has only been implemented in selected schools to date. This paper will examine this experience aiming to generate

recommendations for a sustainable and successful professional development system in Kosovo.

Professional Development in Kosovo

The education system in Kosovo is regulated by a number of laws and policies. The Law on Pre-University Education (2011) provides the framework governing the education in Kosovo. The law highlights the decentralized competencies at local level, including the professional development area in Kosovo. In addition, this law highlights provision of continuous teacher professional development, which is aimed at developing teachers and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Based on the legal provisions (MEST teacher licensing regulation, 2008), teachers should complete at least 20 hours of professional development annually, which are accredited by the MEST. This is one of the requirements needed to obtain and renew a teaching license. Besides meeting the professional development requirement, teachers should undergo a performance assessment process aiming at making sure the teacher meet minimal standards required to remain in the system, as well as to advance in the licensing scheme.

Before adopting the Law on Pre-University Education, in 2008, Kosovo adopted the Law on Education in the Municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo, (No. 03/L-068), which was approved as a package of laws, part of the Comprehensive Status Proposal (the Ahtisaari Plan for Kosovo). For this reason, the law is seen as being politically motivated. Nevertheless, as confirmed in the Law on Pre-University Education, the responsibility for the administration of professional development falls on municipalities, leaving MEST with the task of setting strategic priorities in teacher development, accrediting professional development programs, and monitoring the implementation of professional development.

The school-based approach of professional development has not yet been regulated by any legislation or policy, although there are plans to do so in the next year through the State Council for Teacher Licensing (SCTL). Efforts to implement school-based professional development in Kosovo should be seen in the context of ongoing reforms in the state curricula for the pre-university education. Kosovo's Curriculum Framework (KCF), approved by the MEST in August 2011, is a sophisticated document which applies the philosophy of competence based education. The entire curriculum is based on six (6) key competencies that are also expected to guide the teaching, learning and assessment at school level. The KCF also envisages the application of integrated learning in Grades 6-9 of the lower secondary education.

Therefore, the new curriculum represents basic requirements on the way teachers organize their work and the way schools organize their activities towards its implementation. School-based professional development is expected to support schools in meeting the requirements of the new curriculum and the growing demands for creation of student-friendly environments.

Methodology and the process

Data were collected through a number of instruments. A total of 1266 teachers (54% males and 46 % females) were included in the survey which was focused on the previous teacher experiences in professional development, their professional development needs, and their preferred formats. The survey was done in the following municipalities: Suharekë, Shtime, Shtërpce, Mitrovicë, Podujevë, Istog, Decan, Gjakovë, and Drenas. It was administered through the Professional Development Centers (PDC) at local level established in 2011 by the Basic Education Program (BEP), financed by the USAID and the MEST.

In addition the monitoring reports of school based professional development were

used (drafted by Kosovo Education Center as implementing partner in the Basic education Program). Following initial analysis of the data, selected themes were drawn to be used as discussion topics for the focus group with selected teachers who were involved in the implementation of school based professional development activities.

Group discussions were focused on teacher prior experience in school based professional development as well as challenges and opportunities that this approach has created for their school.

The questionnaires were analyzed by drawing percentages from teacher responses while qualitative data were analyzed through drawing categories and themes from teacher responses and other materials.

The Results

Understanding school based approach

Teachers have difficulties in clearly distinguishing between school based professional development (SBPD) and the implementation of new teaching methods in the classroom or they confuse teacher professional development with the development of teaching skills, knowledge and behaviors in the classroom. Asked on the advantages of school based professional development a teacher tells that "students are more active, classes are more interesting and learning is more efficient as it is more practical" (other group members agree with the opinion). In addition to misunderstanding of general concept, teachers differ also on understanding of different phases of school based professional development.

Thus, to them, it is easier to think about implementation of professional development (including SBPD) than assessment of their own PD needs or taking initiatives for professional development. Answering the question of what makes professional development more effective, teachers focus on the implementation of training programs that were implemented in the past (such as Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking - RWCT, and Experimental Approach in Natural Science - SEA) or that are currently being implemented (by BEP, GIZ etc) in their school by other providers – instead of discussing their individual training needs. Consequently, one of the group discussion members emphasizes that "securing the materials and work conditions influence the implementation of new approaches, large number of students and work conditions influence professional development; in addition, sometime daily schedules of classes will have to change in order to enable participation in a training program." This confirms lack of active approach of teachers to their own professional development and in making the distinction between teaching and school-based professional development.

As an illustration, teachers tell how implementation of school based professional development activities through Basic Education Project (BEP) has saved time and avoided missing classes. Asked what would be some of the professional development programs that they would implement in their schools, a participant said that they "need concrete training in math and language, on concrete methods," a view that sees development coming from outside. The teacher tells how "she has started to learn through Teaching Channel which has a good selection of methods and approaches for teachers; on math and other fields". Answers like this one elaborate the understanding of professional development in school as well as the existence of some individual professional development initiatives. Another group member thinks that "methodological courses are needed in specific subjects, courses on using technology in education, group work etc." The question remains how to develop

more structured aproaches to school based professional development. It was also obvious that their answers to a large extent are based on existing offer of other providers rather than provision of concrete programs that would offer support in facing their concrete challenges such as the ones on new curiculum implementation.

Role of tradition

Teachers seemed to find it difficult to detach themselves from the tradition of participating in trainings whose content, topic and format were determined by others. Such an attitude is reflected both in their responses to questions related to training programs in the past (RWCT, Learner Centered Teaching …), and in their opinions on the current programs (BEP programs, European Computer Driving License as well as those from GiZ). During the focus group discussion it was difficult to have a discussion on the needs assessment for professional development or the possible initiatives for school based professional development without getting into the discussions on the teaching and learning methods in the classroom. Thus, professional development remained a 'concern' of others. It was noticed that determining factors who according to teacher responses should decide about teacher professional development (MEST and donors predominantly) are away from the classroom and school and thus away from the enhancement of teaching and learning <u>in schools</u>. Such an attitude reflects rather the provisions of the old legislation even though the 'new' law on the education in the municipalities was endorsed four years ago, decentralizing professional development competencies to the municipal level.

In this context, based on the opinions of teachers during focus group, the element that requires more attention in the future is the planning and preparation for school based professional development. Teachers were aware of the concept of planning professional development in general and of the individual professional growth plans in particular, but there is no feeling of ownership nor any example of practical commitment in this direction.

The formats of professional development

The data collected through the questionnaire have generated very interesting results as regards the preferences of teachers for the format of professional development. Teachers declared that they prefer professional development, mentoring and coaching in their work place (54 %), in the school (55 %) and the exchange of experiences within their own (44 %) and with other schools (49 %), compared to different training programs outside the school, such as in the municipality (22 %), in the regional center (18 %) or in capital city of Prishtina (22 %). These data are very interesting not only for Municipal Education Authorities but also for other agencies involved in professional development of teachers because this speaks about a shift of teachers' interest from the current form and content of professional development. It is important to note that this attitude of teachers is quite contradictory with the MEST offer for professional development outlined in the training catalogue published in 2011, which contains 'opportunistic' programs supported through donor funds. The questionnaire provides some interesting data related to the preference of teachers for distance learning (34 %), reading of different materials related to professional development (38 %), participation in different conferences (31 %) etc.

An interesting fact is that teachers prefer (65 to 35 %) the school based professional development forms. Such an attitude can be justified because teachers have had many workshops in the past which mainly took place outside the school. This is explained by the fact that teachers were not able to (according to three teachers in the focus group)

decide about participation (the school director of municipal education directorate decide who participates where), nor about the form or content of the workshops (which are determined by the providers and the MEST). While teachers, due to different reasons (including tradition), have difficulties in conceptualizing the school based professional development as a whole, they still (as a sign of refuzing decision- making from outside of school) seem to be more open to individual forms of professional development that are closer to the school, closer to the colleagues, classroom and students. This can be seen as an important information and an opportunity for the implementation agencies and authorities when designing new programs. This at the same time is a signal for the need to review existing programs, especially those which are included in the MEST catalogue (the accredited training programs catalogue published by MEST in 2011). More than two thirds of participants in the questionnaire prefer forms of professional development which are closer to the school and colleagues as an indicator that teachers are open to school based professional development.

School-Based Professional Development Topics

Analysis of questionnaire results has shown a tendency of teachers to highly value (with very much[1]) professional development programmes, which directly serve for improvement of the quality of their work in classroom and in their subject, such as: development of student critical thinking (72%), lesson planning (73%), modern teaching strategies (68%) and, in particular, use of technology in teaching (from 55 to 87% of respondents). On the other hand, teachers do not seem to prefer much (between 20 – 33% of respondents) a number of more general courses such as: inter-cultural learning, curriculum development, implementation and evaluation, laws, by-laws and other educational policies. Orientation of teachers towards the nature of topics/programmes that are directly related to the reality within their classrooms and daily classroom routines (that involve cooperation among colleagues), is an indication of the move towards school-based professional development (SBPD) approach.

The discussion in the focus groups about types/topics of professional development showed an openness of teachers to approaches close to SBPD, but also a lack of awareness and information on school based professional development. All participants in the discussion insisted that they need courses and programmes that are close to students and classroom implementation (that is SBPD), but see these courses as ways to improve teaching and not necessarily as means for their professional development at school.

After clarifying conceptual misunderstandings – teachers participating in the focus group gave valuable information and accounts of SBPD practices, including increased cooperation among colleagues. Thus, subject teachers that include natural sciences cooperate more among themselves in organizing different activities; more specifically, teachers now consult with one another more often before and after lessons about activities they are planning for their lesson. Further, focus group participants (BEP programme trainers) showed that their colleagues asked for more advice. They showed that obstacles that existed before are removed. "Now, the situation is not as if everyone has to do his/her work. Now we get informed more about the activities we will undertake; for example, technology and English teachers cooperate on different aspects of teaching and assist one another; there is more frequent use and more consultation on the use of technology in English classes and communication methods in technology classes," said two focus groups

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1. *Very good was the highest evaluation level in a scale consisting of: not at all, a little, somewhat, very much*

participants, teachers of technology and English classes from the same school.

Even though illustrations from the discussion in the focus group still stand somewhere between accounts of good practices of classroom teaching and genuine accounts of school-based teacher professional development, a change of the school-based cooperation culture is clearly present. Probably this is a result of their personal experience with implementation of Basic Education Program (BEP) courses, which mark an important shift towards applying practices and capacity building efforts that serve for SBPD. BEP courses make a transition between the previous seminar type professional development (in schools and outside of schools) and various forms and sessions of school-based professional development. This approach is a potential for further development of genuine SBPD practices in the future.

In relation to possible teacher initiatives for capacity building and their colleagues' reaction to them, participants said that "now there is a constructive atmosphere for such initiatives; seldom, there are cases when an older colleague says that he/she has already applied all these methods adding that he does not need someone younger showing him any new methods". More often, they mention concrete cases of positive reactions reflected in various forms of professional development such as conversation, demonstration, reflection, observation and other forms. Participants illustrated this with the example of BEP facilitators of sciences, who demonstrated and explained to other teachers the use of teaching aids for laboratory work. Cooperation has created the situation where aids received from BEP were used better, with the demonstration joined by other teachers. There was cooperation with teachers from other schools – where [participants] were invited by other teachers, for example for the topic of use of sensors by teachers for more quality implementation of teaching and learning. Participants insisted that "conditions for completing the practical work largely affect not only teaching quality, but school-based professional development too."

Asked about their initiatives and needs for school-based trainings, teacher talked more about issues that would come from the outside, rather than thinking of what they could do through self-initiative: "There must be specific training and development in math and languages for concrete methods; Albanian language teachers benefit from the existing trainings, but there are none for mathematics". A rare account of self-initiative, a teacher showed that she started to learn on her own from "the teaching channel, where there are many good methods and approaches for teachers; there are methods there for mathematics and other subjects as well; some teachers wanted to know more about those approaches and she shared with them".

Talking about positive aspects of SBPD, teachers list "Cooperation, conversation, more research, creativity, reflection on peer lessons, exchange of experiences and materials"; and tell about the experience that "teachers must be more in line with the technology and to observe students' involvement, who also do more research".

Other aspects of implementation of school-based approach

Undoubtedly new approaches will be faced with various challenges. Regarding resistance to school-based collaborative learning, participants said that "Resistance from colleagues exists only at the beginning; but by seeing positive effects of the new work teachers put aside their reservations and join in the new approach; modelling new behaviours affects the position of teachers towards peer learning". Focus group

participants further speak of other challenges that are faced in the SBPD process. Among other challenges, participants highlighted the issue of space for SBPD sessions. One of them notes that "there might be issues with <u>space</u> – classrooms for use for preparation, consultation, reflection, etc.;We used once the Professional Development Centre (PDC) – but we faced difficulties with procedures to use the PDC for reflection sessions due to miscommunication between school and Municipal Education Directorate (MED). It was not clear who maintains the PDC, who keeps the key, who takes care of the facility and equipment after the sessions, and consequently, it took us a lot of time until we could start our reflection meeting". In addition, teachers note difficulties in implementation of this type of PD from the perspective of <u>time</u> depending on the availability of colleagues. One of the focus group participants noted that "when we plan observation of lessons at the same time with other colleaguesit is difficult to arrange visits and reflection because sometimes principals find it difficult to accommodate changes to the schedule of the working hours; this in turn affects the professional development …".Others said that it was not easy for them to arrange the time for reflection sessions. According to teachers, another important role for SBPD implementation is played by availability of equipment, teaching aids and educational technology. For example, one of the teachers had planned observation of a lesson by a colleague, but said thatthey "faced difficulties in using teaching resources from PDC Resource Bank and were forced to postpone demonstration class due to lack of equipment".

Discussion and recommendations

Implementation of SBPD approach has made initial important steps in Kosovo's education system. Such an initiative creates conditions for building teaching capacities that are closer to the classroom reality and practical teaching aspects. Implementation of the SBPD approach provides a more efficient and sustainable approach, especially in the context of the need for quality implementation of the New Curriculum. However, implementation of this approach in Kosovo schools will require a systematic approach in creation of favourable conditions and provision of adequate support for teachers. In other words, it requires implementation of an approach where teachers will be at the core of assessment of their development needs, planning and implementation of professional development for teachers in their workplaces – in schools.

On the other hand, implementation of the SBPD approach faces a number of challenges. Challenges may be classified as follows:
- Educational system level
- Institutional level, and
- Personal level

Research shows that personal and contextual factors are decisive in teachers' commitment to teaching and development (Day et al, 2005). Meanwhile, in contexts such as Kosovo, where SB approach is at the initial phase, system factors are also important. Kosovo's education system is faced with the challenge of providing financial sustainability for SBPD activities. For the time being, funding for professional development is provided by central and municipal levels and as such it will be difficult to meet school and teachers' needs. In addition to the financial aspect, MEST needs to develop regulations and procedures to support and recognize teacher professional development efforts towards meeting their licencing requirements. To this end, respective procedures must be developed and capacities built for SBPD monitoring and evaluation. Central level and other levels of

educational authorities, including schools, must be engaged in efforts which clarify the SBPD concept and create a conducive environment for such activities. Such a thing can be done though information meetings, brochures, different grants for organizing school based activities, training for school management, establishing school support mechanisms and so on.

At the institutional level, schools may face lack of capacities for meeting professional development needs in a more sustainable fashion. School management in Kosovo so far has mainly dealt with administrative and managerial tasks and less with academic aspects and personnel development. To change this school culture, it will take institutional school-based time and commitment. Part of the changes can be those of structural nature, especially towards creation and operationalization of mid-level management structure, by operationalizing professional departments or by creating new structures for planning and coordination of professional development. Simultaneously, municipalities need to engage in providing physical space and sufficient time for teachers to be able to engage in SBPD activities. This can be provided in the form of schedules to use PDCs, cabinets, libraries or offices in schools. Additionally, teachers may be exempted from different extra-curricular obligations in cases when SBPD sessions are planned. The challenge of the educational system is creation of contexts in which teachers can make the link between school priorities and personal, professional, individual and collective identity and commitment (Day et al, 2005). Therefore, for a successful SBPD not everything depends on the teacher as an individual. Teachers must be guided by school development principles, orientations and priorities.

At the individual level, teachers need to reach the status in which they feel the urge to learn and develop their teaching skills. This motivation is difficult to take place only from the side of teacher motivation, and by the same token, not from external motivators either, such as salary increase for their work. Education system in Kosovo must reach a proper balance through official mechanisms so that teachers are not only motivated to engage in SBPD activities, but they must also be encouraged by a new school culture to move in that direction. This brings about the need to bring about a culture that sees schools as an organization of learning and does not perceive personal development as an individual issue and concern. School-based initiatives in Kosovo provide a clear path for future developments in this direction, addressing challenges systematically and using opportunities to build and guide reforms of pre-university education.

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