

Study of NIS Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher Professionalism in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the central phenomenon of teacher professionalism, identify the perceptions of teacher professionalism and what factors contribute to or inhibit teacher professionalism. The main research question of this study is how do Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools teachers perceive teacher professionalism in the school? Subsidiary research questions were addressed in order to reach the purpose of the study: what are the teachers' perceptions of the factors that contribute to teacher professionalism at school? and what are their perceptions of the factors that inhibit teacher professionalism? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants and analyzed with the help of thematic coding and interpretation. The researcher used purposeful sampling. The study is significant because it voices teachers' perceptions of how teacher professionalism is defined in the educational system of independent Kazakhstan as well as in the Central Asia region. The research findings revealed that teacher professionalism in Kazakhstan is a complex notion that comprises various aspects of teaching and learning including commitment to the profession, school-based courses, professional learning communities, and supportive work environment. There are also certain factors that inhibit professionalism including lack of time-management skills, lack of motivation, burnout and paperwork. The study has limitations as only ten participants shared their perspectives on teacher professionalism. Future studies could extend the research by conducting a similar study in other Kazakhstani school contexts, or other schools in Central Asia, to explore other teachers' perceptions regarding professionalism involving teachers of different subjects teaching in rural and urban areas.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Intellectual Schools, Nazarbayev, perception, teacher professionalism

Teacher professionalism has been explored in many countries at different times. However, there have been no empirical studies on teacher professionalism in Kazakhstan. To address the gap, the following study has been conducted at the site of Nazarbayev Intellectual School. The network of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) was launched in 2008 with the mission to reform both teaching and learning in secondary schools. NIS schools have become a platform for innovative education in collaboration with international staff. NIS students study in a trilingual learning environment and have an intensive school curriculum which allows the learners to think critically and creatively as students take part in various project work and competitions. School educators prepare integrated cross-curricular lessons, use criteria-based assessment to assess student's progress, and focus on their professional development through participation in professional learning communities such as Lesson Study or Action Research. The current research aims at voicing teachers' perceptions on teacher professionalism, as well as identifying the factors that contribute to or inhibit professionalism in schools.

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate in-depth the perceptions of teacher professionalism by NIS teachers, concerning the factors that inhibit or contribute to teacher professionalism at school. The main research question of this study is: How do NIS teachers perceive teacher professionalism in the school? The following subsidiary research questions will also be addressed: 1. What are the NIS teachers' perceptions of the factors that contribute to teacher professionalism at school? 2. What are the NIS teachers' perceptions of the factors that inhibit teacher professionalism at school? In view of the above research questions, a qualitative research design was employed for the study.

Literature Review

The concept of professionalism in teaching is mostly discussed in sociological, educational and ideological contexts in the literature. It is significant to define teacher professionalism in relation to changing political, historical and social contexts, as the notion of teacher professionalism is influenced by the context and time that define it (Demirkasimoglu, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000; Mockler, 2005). The researchers have identified a variety of definitions of teacher professionalism in the last two decades. An analysis of some definitions found in the research is presented below.

Helsby and McCulloch (1996) define the concept of professionalism as “teachers' responsibilities to control and develop their own knowledge and actions for the benefits of their clients” (as cited in Webb et al., 2004, p.83). According to this definition, children)or “clients” as the researchers name them) and their progress in learning should be the crucial part of teaching. Student-oriented or student-centered teaching approach has become dominant in modern pedagogy and this approach enables learners to develop their potential, collaborate with other peers, and contribute to class discussions and projects.

Torres and Weiner (2018) emphasize the importance of knowledge when defining teacher professionalism. The researchers state that professional bodies (colleges and universities) and key stakeholders (practitioners, scholars) determine what counts as “knowledge” which is mostly gained via formal education.

Hanlon (1998) argues that “professionalism is a shifting rather than a concrete phenomenon” and states:

...when I discuss professionals I am talking about groups such as doctors, academics, teachers, accountants, lawyers, engineers, civil servants, etc., that is those groups commonly thought of as professional by the lay public, academics, the professionals themselves and so on. (as cited in Whitty, 2000, p. 282).

A study by Wardoyo et al. (2017) emphasizes that the government plays a crucial role when it comes to defining teacher professionalism. As the researchers state, professionalism is defined as four main competencies that a qualified teacher should have. They are “pedagogical competence, personal competence, social competence, and professional competence” (p. 90). The outlined competencies are connected with the performance of teachers at work, their effectiveness as educators and leaders through teaching and interacting with other colleagues.

Webb et al. (2004), in their comparative analysis of teacher professionalism, claim that modern educational reforms become the reason for transforming the roles and responsibilities of school staff, and this transforming nature of teachers’ work has influenced the perceptions of the teacher’s role as a professional. These researchers emphasize that the notion of teacher professionalism is defined by two opposing conceptions. According to the first concept, there is a “traditional ‘social service’ view of professionalism” whereas the second conception emphasizes “a ‘commercialized’ view of professionalism, with its emphasis on managerial and financial skills” (p. 83) Many researchers discuss two discourses that prevail in defining teacher professionalism, which might be considered in a different way.

Evans (2008) defines professionalism as “new” or “modified” professionalism. This author explains that new professionalism can be analyzed in the light of a reform and standards agenda (pp. 20–29). “New” professionalism, as Evans states, has three conceptions: demanded, prescribed and enacted. Demanded or requested professionalism is connected with certain demands or requests that are expected from employers. Prescribed professionalism reflects proposed performance measures by analysts. Enacted professionalism means your professional practice is observed and analyzed by a specialist from a related sphere. The current researcher postulates that only the latter can be considered as the “only meaningful conception of professionalism” (Evans, 2008, p. 29), since it mirrors “the *reality* of daily practices” (p. 29). The researcher concludes with the following definition of professionalism:

Professionality-influenced practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession’s purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice (Evans, 2008, p. 29).

Factors Contributing to Teacher Professionalism

Many researchers agree that continuing professional development helps teachers to stay professional in their sphere, emphasizing that professional development is closely connected with teacher professionalism (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Sachs, 1997; Swann et al., 2010; Webb et al., 2004). Researchers have a similar view regarding the interconnection between professionalism and professional development, emphasizing the importance of continuous professional development for teachers (Evans, 2008; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Mockler,

2005; Wardoyo et al., 2017). The findings of these researchers suggest that school practitioners are interested in being informed about current educational research findings. Trends in international research and teaching experience contribute to professional development of school educators. Finally, many researchers point out that opportunities for professional development enable teachers to be retained in the profession (Day & Smethem, 2009).

In other research works, lifelong learning has also been mentioned as an important factor that contributes to teacher professionalism (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Webb et al., 2004). These studies reveal that educators are enthusiastic to learn and upgrade their skills since teachers consider continual learning as one of the key characteristics of teacher professionalism. Other researchers, while discussing teacher professionalism, have become interested in developing research skills, as they consider this skill necessary for their own development as well as for student learning (Davies & Ferguson, 2010).

Another factor that contributes to teacher professionalism is collaboration with colleagues. There is much research emphasizing that collaboration with colleagues plays a significant role in defining professionalism at school sites (Hargreaves, 2000; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Kennedy, 1997; Sachs, 1997; Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Webb et al., 2004). This research points out that a collaborative atmosphere in school enables teachers to join forces with the purpose to negotiate, reflect and solve the challenges of a teaching practice. Working in a supportive environment increases a teacher's morale, confidence and emotional well-being (Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004).

Commitment to teaching has also been identified as a factor that contributes to teacher professionalism in school (Day, 2002; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Locke et al., 2005; Okas et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2004;). These studies reveal that such intrinsic factors as commitment and motivation also define teachers' professional identities. Despite the fact that there is accountability and control dominating in the educational systems of many countries, commitment to teaching is considered to be a cornerstone of modern teaching by many teachers. Making a difference in students' lives has always been a core element of the teaching profession, and commitment to better teaching and learning has been pointed out as a significant part of teacher professionalism.

Factors Inhibiting Teacher Professionalism

Ifanti and Fotopoulou (2011) indicate that bureaucracy decreases teachers' motivation to work. In this respect the current research participants expressed concerns regarding paperwork, leading to an expression of dissatisfaction about this. Unnecessary paperwork was also mentioned as a factor that inhibits teacher professionalism in the cross-country study by English and Finnish researchers (Webb et al., 2004) and in other studies set in various contexts (Day & Smethem, 2009; Locke et al., 2005). It was mentioned in the latter research that paperwork too often stems from accountability, which makes teachers responsible for students' exam scores and test results. Indeed, the age of accountability has put much pressure and work intensification on teachers' practices around the world (Day & Smethem, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Locke et al., 2005). Another issue that concerns many teachers is the fact that they have turned into technicians rather than educators. Such transformation is rooted in national testing systems, league tables and school monitoring systems (Locke et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2004). There is an increasing recent trend in the education systems of many countries that teachers teach for tests, making students memorize instead of developing such skills as critical thinking and problem solving.

Lack of autonomy has also been identified as a factor that negatively affects teacher professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Swann et al., 2010; Torres & Weiner, 2018; Webb et al., 2004). These researchers state that a prescribed curriculum is considered by many teachers as a negative aspect of current teaching (Swann et al., 2010; Webb et al., 2004). Their research findings indicate that teachers lack flexibility and autonomy in their workplace which often leads to job dissatisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005), loss of spontaneity in teaching (Webb et al., 2004) and experiencing pressure (Locke et al., 2005).

To date, with the increase of workload, accountability and government interventions, teachers in many countries feel deskilled, pressured and not trusted (Day & Smethem, 2009; Locke et al., 2005; Webb et al, 2004). There is much evidence that most educational reforms have resulted in more paperwork, increased challenges of everyday teaching practice, and temporary instability in their work (Day, 2002). Teachers often feel inundated with workloads that prevent them from teaching, leading to guilt (Hargreaves, 1994), deprofessionalization (Webb et al., 2004), burnout (Mustafa, 2013; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) and stress (Day & Smethem, 2009). Such negative consequences result in teachers' lack of motivation towards their work, making school educators feel confused about their roles (Mustafa, 2013).

Methods

A qualitative research method was used to gain insight into the nature of teacher professionalism. Teachers' perceptions of professionalism were viewed as the central phenomenon of the study, exploring the main research question: How do NIS teachers perceive teacher professionalism in the school? Face-to-face interviews for collecting data were carried out. For the study, we were interested in obtaining more data from the interviews for further in-depth analysis and interpretations regarding teacher professionalism. The qualitative design allowed us to set interviews with the research participants and explore their perceptions on teacher professionalism. As well, we were able to find out factors that contribute to and inhibit teacher professionalism in each school context. Thus, a qualitative research design helped to create conditions that allowed teachers to share their experience and reflections about what professionalism is to them.

Research Sampling and Participants

Purposeful sampling was used for this research. This type of sampling allowed us to choose the participants for the study and explore the phenomenon of the study in-depth. The main sampling criteria were teaching different subjects and having a variety of years teaching experience for the sample. "To develop many perspectives" in our study, (Creswell, 2002, p. 207), we used maximal variation sampling to understand better the perception of teacher professionalism with NIS teachers. Creswell (2002) states that "qualitative research relies more on the views of participants in the study and less on the direction identified in the literature by the researcher" (p. 17). Therefore, it was crucial to obtain the data from different perspectives. We intended to understand how NIS teachers of various subjects and educational backgrounds viewed professionalism.

Before conducting the research, we asked permission from the school principal of NIS. The purpose of the study was explained and we received permission for further research work in the field. An official letter from Nazarbayev University was also provided to explain the stages of the research.

Ten NIS teachers from different subject departments were selected with the help of a purposeful sampling strategy. About 100 teachers work at the site of NIS school, mostly females. Being limited by time scope and availability of the participants, only ten participants were selected for the study. The participants were of different ages, nationalities and professional backgrounds. The selected interview candidates were teachers of physical education, English language, biology, chemistry, physics, math, art, history, and Kazakh and Russian languages. We talked individually to each interview participant to schedule a suitable time and place for organizing an interview. The summary of the research participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the research participants

Participant	Subject	Teaching experience		Gender
P1	English	3 years		Female
P2	Russian	26 years		Female
P3	History	4 years		Male
P4	Biology	21 years		Female
P5	Art	15 years		Female
P6	Maths	4 years		Female
P7	Chemistry	14 years		Male
P8	Physical education	17 years		Female
P9	Kazakh	20 years		Female
P10	Physics	19 years		Female

Data Collection-Interviews

One-on-one interviews with open-ended questions were chosen as the main tool for data collection. As Creswell (2002) states, one-on-one interviews are a good tool for interviewing participants who are open to speak and who can “share ideas clearly”. Although such interviews are a “time-consuming and costly approach” (p. 218), they also provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect, analyze and delve into the issue of the research.

Semi-structured interviews provided greater flexibility and precision for the study, while interviewing the participants using this type of interview also offered the ability to change the pace of the interview process when needed, adding extra questions for clarification or skipping some of them if a prior answer had already addressed the issue. Another advantage of these semi-structured interviews was that respondents were allowed to reflect and mull over ideas before they answered, deepening the topic they discuss. It is significant to encourage interviewees to voice their opinions and perceptions.

Thus, using a semi-structured interview appeared appropriate for the current study, as it offered participants an opportunity to express their ideas about the concept of teacher professionalism in school openly. Asking open-ended questions in qualitative research allows participants to “best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2002, p. 218).

Ethical Considerations

At the very beginning of the interview, all the participants signed an informed consent form.

In the informed consent form, we stated that the name, occupation, and other information concerning the participant would remain anonymous. We also mentioned that the participants' answers would be recorded for further analysis. The data would be kept in a password-protected computer, which had limited access. It was indicated to each participant that only the researcher would have access to the data and might have to show some part of the data to the research supervisor for her guidance in data collection and analysis. When the data analysis was complete and final paper approved, all data would be destroyed. The participants were told about the purpose of the research, their rights and benefits of the study. Since many of the participants had been interviewed for the research purpose for the first time, some of them asked questions regarding the nature of the study, and all their questions were answered. All participants agreed to participate in the research, and there was no one who rejected taking part in the interview.

Data Analysis and Findings

As the interviews revealed, teacher professionalism cannot be considered as something rigid and static; on the contrary, professionalism is quite a dynamic and flexible phenomenon. The majority of literature in this area suggests that teacher professionalism is a changing notion of which teachers should be aware. A history teacher provides his definition of teacher professionalism:

For me, teacher professionalism means to have certain skills for better teaching and more effective learning. Professionalism is associated with a constant strive for further professional development which should be in accordance with the time context and learners' needs.

Seven teachers perceived professionalism as a dynamic phenomenon, which enables teachers to revise and improve both teaching and learning. Professional teachers stay focused on recent innovations and changes in education, as they realize there is no effective teaching without constant development and improvement.

Another striking characteristic of teacher professionalism is ongoing professional development. The vast majority, nine out of ten interviewees, believed that professional development plays an integral role in becoming and being a professional teacher. As one of the participants, who teaches Russian, admits:

Teacher professionalism is highly competitive today and to stay afloat in the profession, modern teachers have to improve their practice through reading about teaching methods and recent educational research areas. Teachers should know their subjects efficiently as well as take part in various local, republic and international events, like workshops or conferences.

Nine interview participants stated a conviction that professional development is a significant part of teacher professionalism that enriches teaching and learning in school. These teachers agreed that professional development is an ongoing process that improves teaching practice and their skills for the better.

Seven respondents mention meeting learners' needs as a key characteristic of teacher professionalism. During interviews, these teachers pointed out that they spend much time

preparing for the lessons and finding the relevant materials for learners' needs. A physics teacher talks about her preparation for the lessons:

To prepare good lessons, I spend much time looking for appropriate class materials. It is really time-consuming as the learners have different language abilities but it is really rewarding. For me, it is important to make my lessons useful for each learner.

Among the research participants were teachers with three years of teaching experience, as well as teachers who have been in their profession for more than twenty years. Despite the level of experience however, both young and mature teachers were convinced that professionalism is defined by a deep knowledge of the subject an educator teaches, and how successfully a teacher can motivate students for in-depth learning. Ten interview participants explain that it is vital for professional teachers to know their subject very well.

For example, an art teacher voices her opinion about the significance of deep subject knowledge for teachers:

It is important for teachers to know their subject well: how to teach it in an effective way, how to motivate students for their class engagement and contribution. Every teacher chooses his way to students' hearts and with in-depth knowledge (of their subject matter) the way is much easier.

Professional competencies include not only the subject knowledge but also good knowledge of children's psychology and their age-related differences. During the interviews, six participants emphasized that knowing child psychology and age-related differences is crucial for a professional teacher. As a biology teacher explains:

A professional teacher, in my opinion, should strive for professional growth in his/her subject as well as in pedagogical and psychological aspects. Having sufficient knowledge and skills will result in the effectiveness of the work and the quality of education.

Eight participants noted that ICT skills have become a significant "must-have" for contemporary teachers. Teachers should be confident IT users to lead a lesson in the 21st century. A math teacher emphasizes the shift in the demand of skills in a teaching profession:

Nowadays teachers are not only expected to teach but to do many other things as well. One of them is to use IT very well: teachers create presentations, tables, create online documents, use Edmodo for learning and do many other tasks or projects that require sufficient ICT skill. Teachers with good ICT skills are considered to be leading professionals now.

Factors Contributing to Teacher Professionalism

Eight respondents mention that commitment to the teaching profession and strive for professional development play a crucial role in becoming a professional teacher. A chemistry teacher believes that commitment to the profession is significant saying that:

I think, it is important for teachers to have that inner desire to be a professional educator since our job requires constant development and

learning. We cannot just stop and teach the same things for years. Our knowledge and teaching approaches should be revised and improved. If a teacher does not have a desire to learn, he or she cannot be considered as a teacher anymore.

This quote reveals that professional commitment is an essential quality for school teachers. Eight teachers agreed that commitment and motivation to the profession contribute to professionalism; it is a driving force of school improvement, especially in terms of professional development for teachers.

All ten participants believe that having a variety of opportunities for professional development sustains teacher professionalism at school. A teacher of physical education describes how opportunities for development improve her teaching practice:

For me, it does not matter if it is an online course or a course at the school site. I always try to take more from my participation. For example, I attended a course dedicated to develop critical thinking skill. I found it very useful as I learnt some techniques and tasks that will help me to develop students' critical thinking ability. Such courses make me more professional in my subject, I feel more confident during the lessons.

This teacher's response reveals that opportunities for professional development enable teachers to improve their teaching practices, which appear to result in more effective student learning (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Webb et. al, 2004). There is a common pattern in terms of attitude towards having a variety of opportunities for professional development, wherein most interview respondents feel motivated and enthusiastic to gain more knowledge and methodological support from the opportunities the school provides.

During interviews, eight participants mention a '2+1' school project as an activity that contributes to teacher professionalism. Teachers with little experience pointed out that the school project '2+1' helps them in becoming more professional. The '2+1' project allows teachers to attend and observe each other's lessons on an agreed time. Every teacher is supposed to attend 2 lessons by other teachers who teach the same subject as the attendee, plus 1 lesson by a different subject teacher. These professional visits help beginning teachers to learn more about teaching methods and learning strategies that they can apply later in their lessons. Moreover, a '2+1' project contributes to better collaboration among teachers at school, as they discuss the lesson stages and share their views together. As a teacher of English says about the advantages of this project:

When I have a chance to visit my colleagues' lessons, I learn more about using interesting teaching techniques that I can apply in my lessons. I find lesson observations very useful as I can see my students working in another lesson and the observations help to be a more effective teacher. I do not have many years of teaching experience so such observations give me an opportunity to improve my teaching style and understand children's psychology better.

Four participants said that a mentoring program in school contributes to teacher professionalism. Three of the four respondents are beginning teachers. According to the participants with less than five years of teaching experience, the school offers good

opportunities for enhancing teaching practice through a mentoring program. The mentoring program creates conditions for a professional collaboration between a beginning teacher and a teacher with a rich teaching practice, wherein teachers plan lessons together, observe each other's lessons and provide constructive feedback regarding teaching and learning. Young teachers stated that this program contributes to their professional development and the gaining of useful teaching experience. A teacher of history describes how the mentoring program helped him address challenges in the classroom:

I had problems with some naughty students in my class who teased other students and (I) didn't know what to do with them. I explained the situation to my mentor and asked for advice...She suggested some useful tips that I started applying in the lessons. Later, to my excitement, their behavior changed and the relationships became better...Her help was a relief to me.

This response reveals that the mentoring program nurtures teaching practices, especially for beginning teachers. This program, as younger teachers state, is a key initiative for becoming a professional teacher.

Eight interview participants defined their participation in professional learning communities (PLC) at school as a factor that has a positive influence on their professionalism. A PLC is a group of educators who meet regularly, share expertise, and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. There are three main PLCs in the schools that these participants attend for their professional development: "action research", "lesson study" and "teaching talented and gifted children". Eight interview participants mentioned that such PLCs enrich their teaching and student learning. A Kazakh language teacher shares her experience regarding the effectiveness of being part of a lesson study project on her practice:

I am part of Lesson study group. I think that working with colleagues in such professional communities makes me feel I am not alone with the challenges or issues that emerge in the class or school. My colleagues from lesson study group help me explore my practice through observations, class projects and discussions.

Consequently, it should be emphasized that participation in a school PLC can have a positive influence on teachers' practices. Indeed, eight participants identified PLCs as a factor that contributes to teacher professionalism, stating that participation in a school PLC has enriched both their teaching and student learning. According to the responses of these eight participants, PLCs help teachers to reflect on their practices and discuss classroom challenges.

Another factor that contributes to teacher professionalism is school-based courses that teachers attend to improve their language skills (Kazakh and English) and ICT competencies. The courses are intended to provide support and assistance to school teachers, despite their teaching experience or subject. Seven interview participants claimed that these school-based language courses are beneficial for teaching in a trilingual learning environment, and ICT courses increase teachers' confidence while creating presentations or online documents for lessons. Some teachers attended courses because they have a language or technology goal. Teachers are enthusiastic to attend Kazakh or English language courses, because they work in a trilingual environment. Teachers and students are expected to have sufficient skills in

three languages. As a consequence, during their lessons, teachers of the school organize activities that improve students' language skills. A physical education teacher describes how a school language course enhanced her level of Kazakh language:

I attend Kazakh lessons for teachers twice a week. This is a very unusual experience for me as in my previous work we didn't have such opportunities. I often try to use Kazakh and English languages during my lessons with my students, especially for setting tasks and giving instructions. There is much progress in my Kazakh, I should admit.

The final factor mentioned during the interviews was work environment. Nine respondents consider a friendly and trustworthy environment at school as one of the key factors that contribute to teacher professionalism. Teachers' responses reveal that working in a friendly place makes them feel safe and confident. A teacher of Russian explains how a friendly school environment keeps her enthusiastic during the day:

This is my third year in this school and I have found some good friends here. I realize I work more efficiently if I have breakfast or lunch with school colleagues whom I can trust and talk openly. In general, I don't want to say that everyone on board is friendly and nice as I do not know some of the teachers, especially who came last year. Anyway, there are some teachers, who can make my working day brighter even when I have so many things to do at work.

According to the majority of the participants, a supportive work environment promotes collaboration and trust among schoolteachers. Nine participants imply that in such working environments they are open for building rapport as well as feel motivated to work and collaborate by learning and sharing with other teachers. Knowing that you are trusted as a specialist increases teachers' morale and self-esteem. Therefore, it is vital to create a supportive work environment where teachers will feel comfortable to teach and collaborate.

Factors Inhibiting Teacher Professionalism

Seven participants believed that if teachers are not motivated to develop professionally, such an attitude can be a hindrance to better teaching and learning. What is more, more than a half of the participants claim that lack of motivation can prevent school improvement. A teacher of biology describes how lack of teachers' motivation might affect school improvement:

I am afraid (of) what might happen if all teachers became not interested in their professional development. As one of the Kazakh poets said, "teacher is the heart of the school" and these words emphasize the significance of teachers' contribution to learning, teaching and school improvement in general. Therefore, if the teachers lack motivation to increase their professional potential, the students' academic achievement will decrease and the school will not be able to develop in a sustainable way.

Nine respondents considered lack of time-management skills as another important factor that inhibits teacher professionalism. According to the participants, this factor can prevent them from effective planning and prioritizing tasks. A teacher of English shares her opinion regarding poor time-management skills:

In this rapid pace of life and constant flow of information, it is quite challenging to organize your day and stick to the things that you have planned. I want to do certain things during the day, like checking and marking the students' assignments, attend the meeting, plan the lessons and go to school courses but the plans turn out to be half done at the end of the working day. This makes me even more stressful. I even don't have time to read and learn something new for myself.

Eight participants mentioned burnout as a factor that inhibits professionalism at school. In most cases, burnout is associated with being exhausted, stressful and emotionally deteriorated. This is quite a common phenomenon for many professions, including teachers. A science teacher explains how burnout has affected her at times:

I teach five or six lessons a day and I also have extra lessons for weaker students. My schedule is pretty tough as I spend most of my time teaching the class or grading the students' work. I feel so tired at the end of the day that at home I just relax. I do not read or learn something and that is very frustrating for me. There are days when I have not so many lessons and it is when I can learn and reflect my own practice.

It can be noticed that burnout at work does not allow teachers to find spare time for reading or learning, as they have to prepare for or teach classes. If teachers feel too stressful or too tired, they are not likely to be able to dedicate time to increase their teaching potential through reading research or learning more about recent innovations in education. Therefore, burnout inhibits teacher professionalism in school.

Seven interview participants complained that too much paperwork is a hindrance to their teaching practice and professional development. The participants believe that teaching has become more of a bureaucracy: new reports and forms need to be completed on a regular basis. A teacher of Kazakh shared the following view regarding school paperwork:

About fifteen years ago, I did not have so much paperwork. Basically, I was checking and grading students' work; you know, a normal routine for teachers. I would say that in the last five-six years teaching has transformed in a significant way and for me, this change is not for the better. Teaching has become more of clerical work than a learning process. Writing reports, letters and different forms takes most of my time. After that, I feel uninspired ...and do not want to do anything, just want to rest for some time.

The interview participants point out the final factor inhibiting professionalism is a lack of autonomy for teachers. Seven out of ten participants claim that they have limited opportunities for exercising flexibility at school. A language teacher shared her view on the limited opportunities for teachers' autonomy during lessons as follows:

I like our school program as it develops all four main skills of our students: they listen, read, write and speak in Russian during the lessons. However, I have some concerns. The problem I have is that my lessons are focused more on doing the tasks to achieve learning objectives rather than practicing language skills. For example, there are about seventeen learning objectives in the term. Since the terms are not long, that means we are short of time. The

students have to achieve all the objectives, and there is not enough time for doing some extra activities that I would like to do with the students. We just stick to the learning objectives.

Conclusion and Discussion

These interview findings reveal that teachers perceive professionalism as a flexible and dynamic phenomenon. Both young and mature teachers admit that professionalism is a changing notion that enables teachers to stay focused on their practices.

During the interviews, nine teachers emphasized that professionalism is closely connected with professional development explaining the significance of ongoing development and learning for professional teachers. Hargreaves & Cunningham (2010) as well as other researchers (Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Sachs, 1997; Wardoyo et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2004;) have also found teachers indicating professional development as one of the most important factor of professionalism.

We found that it is crucial for teachers to meet learners' needs and make the lessons encouraging and supportive for all learners. Most teachers consider giving learners the best education and making a difference to students' lives as the core elements of teaching and learning. Webb et al. (2004) also identified a similar finding in their research, stating that children and their learning is consistently a priority for teachers from different backgrounds.

Furthermore, these teachers perceive professionalism as deep subject knowledge that enables teachers to motivate students for better learning. This finding is notable in that all ten participants were convinced that sufficient subject knowledge is an essential part of teacher professionalism. This finding is also in line with Locke et al. (2005), who found that teachers view the knowledge and skills necessary for a teaching career as considerably important in identifying professional school educators.

During the interviews, the participants named information and communication technology (ICT) skills as a crucial must-have for a modern classroom. Teachers highlighted that ICT skills enrich their lessons and engage learners in an effective way. Similar findings are also presented in Ifanti and Fotopoulou's (2011) study. Equally, Okas et al. (2014) have indicated that such skills enhance teacher professionalism in school.

Overall, teachers' answers are in line with the research findings of other studies. These similarities reveal that teachers share common understanding and perceptions about professionalism. The educators of Kazakhstan also share generally similar perceptions about factors that contribute and inhibit teacher professionalism.

Implications

School Administration

Schools may create good conditions for increasing professional collaboration among its teachers by promoting a supportive and trustworthy environment at school. Teachers may meet with school administration and share the issues they face in their daily teaching or they can complete surveys about the challenges that inhibit their work in school. Together teachers and school administration can discuss and solve the issues. Such constructive

cooperation can be reasonably expected to result in more effective teaching, higher student academic achievement and school improvement.

Schools can also provide a certain amount of time that is systematically dedicated to teacher professional development. During this time, teachers may read articles, learn Kazakh or English languages and focus on their research or projects. Spending time in this manner may help teachers to reduce their stress, take a break from their routine work and reflect on their teaching practice. Time for professional development should contribute to teacher professionalism and also promote one of the main values of modern education - lifelong learning.

Educational Policy Implications

The study findings also suggest policy implications for teacher professionalism at NIS schools. The successful initiatives of NIS network schools may be also implemented in other Kazakhstani schools. Such school projects as “2+1” mentoring program, action research and lesson study should become widespread within the country’s schools to support professionalism among early career and more experienced teachers alike. Common school projects may enable teachers to build professional learning communities to share their challenges in their teaching practices and address issues together. Such collaborations is likely to increase teacher morale and commitment to the profession.

Key policy makers may also provide a variety of opportunities for teacher professional development by initiating trainings and workshops that will address the needs of school teachers. It is crucial to keep teachers updated with recent reforms and innovations and such professional trainings and workshops should enhance teaching and learning. Therefore, the implementation of professional development programs should sustain teacher professionalism in the school context.

The final implication of the study for educational policy makers is to reduce paperwork for school teachers. There has been too much accountability placed on teachers over the last decade, not only in our country but in others as well. Accountability requires teachers to write various reports and forms to prove that they do what they are supposed to do. Bureaucracy has become a dominant part of teaching and this is not a change for the better. It is significant for stakeholders, parents and other members of the community to ensure that teachers teach and students learn in an efficient way. However paperwork should be reduced to a minimum, and the reduction should seek to allow teachers to prepare interesting and engaging lessons, collaborate with other school colleagues, and find time for professional development.

These suggested implications can be expected to contribute to sustaining teacher professionalism in Kazakhstani schools. It is important to provide conditions for teacher professional development and continuous learning, especially in today’s fast-paced world, where teachers are expected to be competent, vibrant and flexible in their workplace. To sustain professionalism means there should be an overall emphasis on effective teaching and learning through the professional development of school educators.

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