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Beginning Teachers' Professional Socialization in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: The Challenges and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines and develops an in-depth understanding of two beginning teachers' professional socializations in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The study is a historical and descriptive account that provides insights into the impact of socio-political upheaval on the lives of two beginning teachers. The study focuses on the challenges the teachers faced in their initial stages of work and on how they addressed these. The teachers' professional socialization stories are described in three realms: classroom, school and community. The study examines in greater detail the professional and relational challenges that the two beginning teachers faced while interacting with their pupils, administrators, colleagues, pupils' parents and education officials.

In addition to the typical challenges of adjusting to school culture, rules and regulations and classroom management faced by beginning teachers, these individuals had to deal with additional tribulations that have manifested after and because of the collapse of the former USSR. These include insufficient resources for schools, inadequately qualified and inexperienced colleagues, high student drop-out rates, a constantly changing curriculum, lack of textbooks, low salaries with frequent delays and deductions.

These young teachers, despite their circumstances, emerge as caring and considerate individuals who adopted a variety of responses, including maintaining their values and performance, while at the same time attempting to influence others as they protected themselves from criticisms. The combination of social strategies and micropolitical tactics proved useful in examining the beginning teachers' broader positions and specific tactics of addressing the crucial challenges.

The study offers insights for school administrators, experienced teachers and education authorities at district, provincial and national levels. It points out the importance of assisting beginning teachers in improving performance, retention and long-term personal and professional well-being. The thesis also highlights some of the major challenges of conducting qualitative studies in the Central Asian context. Finally, the study also revealed that there is a need to develop educational research

capacity in Kyrgyzstan, a situation which must be addressed in order to improve the educational system.

Introduction

The paper reports a qualitative case study of beginning teachers in secondary classes of general schools in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, it presents the beginning teachers' experiences, beliefs, practices, the challenges they come across while working in their initial stages at school, and how they address these challenges. In addition to the typical personal and institutional challenges of adjusting to school culture, rules and regulations, dealing with children having various individual needs, or managing classrooms, beginning teachers in Kyrgyzstan now face the challenges that have emerged after the collapse of the former Soviet Union i.e. socio-political and economic upheavals. The beginning teachers, through their unique perspectives, provide insights not only into the normal pressures faced by the beginning teacher, but also into such an experience when it is compounded by the challenges of post-Soviet realities. Thus, the paper provides unique insights into the plight of beginning teachers operating under severe duress in a unique historical period.

Challenges Faced by Beginning Teachers and Their Coping Strategies

The Kyrgyz beginning teachers' prior education, experiences and beliefs, which they brought to their workplaces and to the social context of becoming teachers, were extremely important in shaping their professional socialization stories. These professional socialization stories have a complex interplay between themselves, their workplaces, the socio-economic context and its cultural history (Lacey, 1994; Zeichner, 1993). Their professional socialization took place in a context of socio-political, economic and political realities and changes (Arfwedson, 1979; Lacey, 1994; Jordell, 1987; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). In many ways, these wider forces helped them in shaping their careers, facing challenges by developing coping strategies and tactics in them. The beginning teachers' personal characteristics and biographies also played important roles in their professional socialization (Bliss & Reck, 1991; Constance, 1997; Kuzmic, 1994; Zeichner, 1993). Their formative years and the debut of their careers occurred during a period when their lives were significantly changing.

The beginning teachers joined and became members of their school organizations and acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to participate as members of

their new workplaces. The cherished beliefs and practices that they had developed earlier on in their organizations (Thiessen, 1996), were challenged due to the demands that the new work place placed on them and were a source of tension. Consequently, they further developed and modified their beliefs and practices to accelerate their careers.

Though the beginning teachers in Kyrgyzstan faced many challenges in their initial period of work, their struggles were multi-layered in comparison to their Western counterparts because of Kyrgyzstan's particular socio-economic and political difficulties (Bullough, 1997; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Gold, 1996; Knowles, 1988; Kuzmic, 1994; Lacey, 1977; Loughran, Brown & Doecke, 2001). They experienced frustrations and fulfillments, discovered shortcomings and strengths, and learned to celebrate the highs and accept the lows of their professional lives realistically (Cole, 1996). The Kyrgyz beginning teachers worked in a context of rapid and complex changes, economic crisis, unemployment, poverty, dislocated civilians, poor living conditions, worsening health situations and other social problems precipitated by the break-up of the former Soviet Union (Avalos, 1993; Heyneman & DeYoung, 2004; Niyozov, 2001). Teachers were generally considered scapegoats for the society's problems (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 1994). They struggled with low teacher prestige (Hurst & Rust, 1990), increasingly worsening work and life conditions, impoverished schools and dwindling resources (little or no teaching resources including textbooks), low salaries, changes in curriculum, high rates of pupil dropout ratio, and little support and lack of professional development opportunities. The beginning teachers also worked with poorly qualified colleagues, because of their exit from the work force due to the low salary and difficult working conditions, leading to a serious teacher shortage particularly in rural schools.

Thus, beginning teachers struggled with meeting and confronting the demands and constraints presented by the people at their workplaces (Kuzmic, 1994). The teachers faced micropolitical struggles for power, control, autonomy, position (status), and resources.

The challenges can be categorized into three realms: classroom (pupils), school (administrators, colleagues) and community (parents, officials; cf. Jordell, 1987; Pollard, 1982; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999; Zeichner & Gore, 1999). The realms framework offers a more comprehensive and complex lens for understanding the lives of the beginning teachers.

Working with Pupils

The beginning teachers interacted and dealt with many challenges presented by their pupils such as: conducting lessons effectively, dealing with discipline and upbringing (tarbia) issues (Bullough, 1990; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), lack of strong content knowledge or a wide repertoire of pedagogy to teach effectively and to adjust to their schools well (Roehrig, Pressley & Talotta, 2002). The pupils played a crucial part in shaping the path of the beginning teachers' socialization (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). They influenced the beginning teachers' selection and use of teaching approaches, classroom management and discipline strategies (Blase, 1997; Thiessen, 1992; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). The beginning teachers faced serious classroom management and discipline issues in interacting with their pupils because of their own lack of experience and skills (Bullough et al., 1989; Brock & Grady, 2001; Lacey, 1977; Roehrig et al., 2002; Veenman, 1984). They struggled to establish a good rapport with their pupils on one hand and tried to establish authority or a degree of formality on the other hand (Brock & Grady, 2001; Tubbs, 1996).

The beginning teachers had the authority to educate, control and discipline their pupils, not only as teachers but also as elders to their pupils, which made them adopt more assertive and proactive strategies and tactics (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). The beginning teachers worked on these challenges in ways that maintained their own priorities or preferred practices. In a few instances, the beginning teachers complied with the pupils' demands in order to avoid tensions. They influenced their pupils to learn (Beauchamp & Parsons, 1992; Bullough et al., 1989) by attending to their individual needs. Besides learning the content knowledge in the curriculum, they also encouraged students to adopt good behaviour, keep good company and respect elders.

The beginning teachers had more autonomy regarding what they did and how they dealt with the challenges presented by pupils in the classrooms. But they often needed to comply strategically and demonstrate to those outside their classrooms (administrators, colleagues, parents and officials) that they could teach well and control their pupils (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Lacey, 1977; Olson & Osborne, 1991).

Working with Administrators

The administrators presented serious challenges to the beginning teachers (Brock & Grady, 2001; Duckworth & Carnine, 1987; Veenman, 1985), because their expectations, reinforced rules and control over the beginning teachers was not in

accordance with what the teachers themselves expected or wanted (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1997; Sparkes, 1988). Beginning teachers face the risks of being judged as disrespectful, of losing one's job, of being penalized, of getting their salaries docked up, etc. from the administrators' side.

In spite of the norms of respect for authorities and elders, the latter did not benefit much from the advice and feedback on their practices from the administrators due to their protectionist and reactive strategies and tactics at the time of class observations (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Watkins, 2000). Thus, theirs was an isolated struggle to address challenges predominantly through the process of trial and errors (Dollase, 1992).

They often passively complied with their administrators' definition of a situation, even when they did not agree with it, because they wanted to avoid conflicts with the administrators. They refrained from expressing their views and resentments so as to avoid creating a negative image of themselves. In the absence of induction programmes and support, many of the potentially good young teachers abandoned teaching out of disappointment (Cole, 1996).

The beginning teachers wanted to establish good relations with their administrators, make a good impression of their capabilities, gain their support, and thus, get a more suitable timetable arrangement, better resources and more teaching hours (more salary) in the future in return (Ball, 1989). They also did not want to expose any possible weakness to their administrators and instead tried to show their best practices (Bullough, 1989).

Only in exceptional situations did the beginning teachers confront the administrators openly such as when they felt they were being treated unfairly. For example, a young female biology teacher confronted her vice-principal despite the possible repercussions when her integrity was questioned.

Working with Colleagues

The beginning teachers also faced challenges from their colleagues such as competing for resources and facilities, and the inherent cultural expectations of having respect for elders and gaining colleagues' recognition. The beginning teachers were assigned and expected to assume the same responsibilities as their more experienced colleagues (Brock & Grady, 2001), yet they were not always recognized and accepted by their senior colleagues (Tubbs, 1996). The new teachers were given poorer materials and facilities in comparison to their senior colleagues (Bullough, 1997; Roehrig, Pressley & Talotta, 2002). The new teachers

faced their colleagues' resentment because they were giving them competition for teaching hours and salary.

Due to the prevailing teacher culture of individualism, the teachers usually worked in isolation and didn't find many cooperative, qualified colleagues at schools to act as their mentors (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Issues such as their colleagues' lack of cooperation, lack of support, gossip and criticism made the beginning teachers' experiences working with colleagues very difficult.

The beginning teachers also did not want to expose any weaknesses to their senior colleagues by asking for help (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Jordell, 1987; Rust, 1994). Instead, they learned to address challenges on their own through trial and errors rather than relying on others (Hannam et al., 1984). The prevailing belief that teaching should be learned by independent trial and error was reflected in (and sustained by) norms that constrained the interaction between the beginning teachers and their experienced colleagues (Saraco, 1994).

The beginning teachers curbed their disagreements and criticisms and complied when dealing with their senior colleagues in order to avoid tensions and conflicts, and to get accepted as worthy colleagues (Ball, 1987; Schempp et al., 1993). They protected themselves from their senior colleagues' criticisms and acted cautiously to avoid make a bad impression (Goodman, 1988). They accepted the fact that their senior colleagues had access to better resources and facilities (Bullough, 1997; Brock & Grady, 2001) which they eventually hoped to secure with more work experience (Dolmage, 1996).

Working with Parents

The beginning teachers needed to deal with demands from pupils' parents (Blase, 1997; Brock & Grady, 2001; Rust, 1994; Veenman, 1984). Though the parents had no formal authority, they could still put pressure on the beginning teachers by challenging their decisions and actions (Lortie, 1975) and interfering in the beginning teachers' practices and actions.

The teachers worried about establishing a good rapport with the parents, gaining acceptance and getting support from them (Reay, 2001; Veenman, 1984). Having their own perspective about their children's schooling, the parents questioned, challenged and interfered with the beginning teachers' practices, selection and use of instructional or disciplinary strategies, and ways of marking (Blase, 1997; Lortie, 1975; McIntosh, 1976; Roehrig et al., 2002; Tangri & Moles, 1987; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). The parents exploited the beginning teachers'

inexperience by trying to influence their teaching strategies more vehemently than they did with senior teachers especially with the amount of homework to be assigned or the marking criteria to be relaxed in individual cases.

In addition, although all the teachers in Kyrgyzstan were involved in collecting money from parents for school building repairs due to funding constraints, it was a more exhausting experience for the young teachers (DeYoung & Santos, 2004; Karim kyzy, 2003; Reeves, 2003). The parents, who had more than one child in school, hugely resented the money collection, as they had to pay money per child.

The parents' socio-economic backgrounds also influenced their relationships with the beginning teachers (Arfwedson, 1979; Jordell, 1987; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Town parents, who lived in relatively higher-status communities, could spend more time and money on their children's schooling and frequently visited the town school and interacted with the teachers (Blase, 1997; McIntosh, 1976; Roehrig et al., 2002; Veenman, 1984).

On the other hand, village parents, being too preoccupied with their household or farm work, didn't take an active interest in their children's schooling (Reay, 2001; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). They avoided visiting the schools frequently or interfering with the teachers' practices, but didn't offer any support either, because of their overall grievances against the educational system. These resentments included: having to pay the repair-related expenditures to the schools in spite of their dire circumstances, disappointment with the poor quality of education in the village schools, and the slim chances of their children being admitted to the institutions of higher education due to the corruption prevalent in society.

The beginning teachers often compromised their actions and behaviours to meet the parents' demands, and refrained from confronting them or expressing their own views (Blase, 1997). They had to withstand parents' demands that challenged their core beliefs and practices, especially when the parents asked for special favours for their children, 1980). The new teachers, at times had to protect themselves and their practices from the parents' views of how they ought to work by using protective strategies (Gold, 1996; Tangri & Moles, 1987). For example, Ainura, a young biology teacher handling the gymnasium activities, faced a lot of pressure from the well-off parents, as they were spending extra money for the gym classes; and thus, wanted exclusive attention to be paid to their children (Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984). But Ainura resisted the pressures and didn't compromise her teaching practices.

Working with Officials

Due to the shortage of teachers and lack of qualified colleagues, the beginning teachers in Kyrgyzstan were often treated just like their more experienced colleagues in terms of the inspection of their practices by education officials. Thus, the teachers had to show the officials good practices and comply with their demands in order to avoid getting negative feedback and reprimands from the officials as well as their own administrators.

In addition, the teachers, as state employees, were exploited by the officials to participate in state-initiated activities like elections, referenda, and jubilee celebrations etc. as ballot counters, promoters of election candidates, and distributors of election promotional materials (Dukenbaev, 2004). Moreover, all the teachers were also obliged to subscribe to government publications, costing up to a third of their salaries; purchase books by officially endorsed poets, writers and politicians; and raise money for lavish meetings between local education officials and school inspectors.

In addition, the practice of the use of schools as polling stations, especially in rural areas, disrupting classes and other school routines, was fairly common. Only in exceptional cases, as Kleine-Kracht and Wong (1991) observe, the beginning teachers confronted the education officials collectively, so as to not to get penalized individually. For example, the teachers of a village school collectively boycotted teaching when their salaries were docked for newspaper subscriptions, so as to not to get penalized individually.

Summary

The beginning teachers' responses to the challenges varied according to circumstances and contexts they worked in. The study confirmed the importance of the particularities of the local contexts that enabled or constrained the beginning teachers to adopt certain kinds of strategies or tactics over others. The beginning teachers were confronted with a micropolitical reality in their job situation; each school as an organization functioned by certain traditions and habits and there were different power relations between various individuals and groups at any school.

This study also showed that the local culture and traditions played important roles in shaping the new teachers' relations with other people. The new teachers respected their administrators, colleagues, pupils' parents and officials as elders, and hence, were compliant while interacting with them. Because of respect for

these elders, they often could not practice or express many things that they wanted to say or do.

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