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Teacher Education in North Macedonia: Reforms, Standardisation, and Creating Communities of Lifelong Learners

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Introduction

This chapter explores teacher education in North Macedonia and looks ahead to possible ways in which teacher development could be improved over the next decade. The first sections address and discuss the situation today, with regard to teacher education, including in terms of the evolution up to this point in time. Firstly, a broad overview is presented, after which the specific context and practices of teachers' ongoing development are addressed. In the later sections of this chapter, it is proposed that models of practice that could develop teachers in North Macedonia should focus on empowerment, autonomy, and the creation of communities which support and enable extended professionals.

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Context of Teacher Education in North Macedonia

Teacher education in North Macedonia has been fundamentally affected by the political turmoil so typical of countries of former Yugoslavia, which is also true for most former communist countries. This turmoil, in many ways, still prevails today. This is why North Macedonia, as with other former Yugoslavian member states, almost 30 years after the break-up of the federation (1991–1992), is still often said to be in a transitional period. This affects many facets of life in contemporary North Macedonia, including education. The main characteristic of the education systems in many Western Balkan countries, especially North Macedonia, can be defined as an ongoing struggle to consolidate a traditional and outdated education infrastructure with abruptly changing, often populist, education policies that are rarely based on empirical evidence (Joshevska and Kirandziska 2017).

North Macedonia has had formal teacher education for 75 years. During this time, the model and philosophy of teacher education has changed to reflect the spirit of the times and the needs of the country. In the earliest of these years, the late 1940s, one significant consideration was the amount of time spent in formal education deemed necessary for future primary school teachers, leading to raising the level of teacher education to an academic degree. Up to the late 1950s, teaching was considered to be a vocation, a skill set that could be acquired through a total of two years' study. However, as formal education was made available to more and more people, a need for the greater professionalisation of teaching grew, requiring a more rigorous programme of training. Therefore, 1964 saw the creation of pedagogy academies in Skopje, Shtip, and Bitola.

The reasons for this transformation lay in the need to standardise teacher education in order to ensure the quality of teaching for the then-eight years of primary education. Furthermore, where secondary teachers were concerned, the aim was to elevate secondary education as a means of effective, pre-university-level education, and thus teaching at secondary education level needed to become more subject-specific. Later on, at the beginning of the 1980s, courses that focused on prospective teachers' taught subjects were removed from the curricula at the academies for pedagogy and transferred to subject faculties. From this point on, teachers that taught mathematics at grades 6–8 in primary education, or at secondary level, were educated at the Faculty of Mathematics, rather than at the Faculties of Pedagogy. This contributed to elevating teachers' taught subject knowledge from the level of two years of post-secondary education to the level of a bachelor's degree (Kamberski

2000). The next section explains in detail how lower primary teachers (grades 1–5) and subject teachers (grades 6–8 and secondary education subject teachers) acquire their credentials to teach in primary and secondary education, respectively. The current situation in higher education for teachers, mainly regarding the effects of recent higher education reform and the process of unifying the quality of initial teacher education (ITE), is also summarised.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Since North Macedonia became independent from Yugoslavia in 1991, higher education has generally undergone transformations congruent with the country's complex socio-economic and political circumstances. Teacher education has been no exception. These reform priorities have been marked by qualitative parameters, with the aim of improving education quality and measuring North Macedonia against European standards. Two crucial reforms have characterised the changing status and perception of teachers' initial education in North Macedonia. The first was the implementation of the Bologna reforms to higher education, with North Macedonia signing the accord in 2003, aimed at increasing the transparency and quality of the national education system, as well as international academic mobility (Benelux Bologna Secretariat 2009). The second reform was the introduction of an additional year of primary education, raising the total from eight years to nine years. There is ample research about the benefit of quality early education for better education outcomes and success in later life, especially when it comes to literacy and numeracy skills (i.e. Duncan et al. 2007). However, in North Macedonia, preschool uptake is only 35%, as recorded in 2017, and thus lags behind the EU goal of 95%.[1] As preschool institutions are not equally distributed in the country and preschool is not free, most excluded children are those from rural areas, children with disabilities, and those with lower socio-economic status, such as from the Roma community. This reform aimed to make one year of preschool education mandatory and free for all students[2] in order to provide equal educational opportunities for all school-age children (Miovska-Spaseva et al. 2018).

After the Bologna Declaration was signed in 2003, the country's faculties (departments) started implementation within two to three years of the signing. The idea behind the Bologna Process was to create a singular European standard of higher education through the transference of credits acquired upon passing higher education courses (i.e. the Education Credit Transfer System or ECTS): for instance, in order to be awarded a BA, a student must

acquire 240 ECTS credits. The Bologna Process and ECTS standards ensure horizontal (across disciplines) and vertical student mobility (advancement in degrees by transferring credits from one university to another) through pledging unity with EU standards regarding the difficulty level of subjects studied within an academic year. However, in practice, the ECTS is mainly reduced to a mechanical conversion of the number of students' contact hours, rather than any estimation of difficulty level or labour intensity. As such, many of the challenges in initial teacher education (ITE) are partly a consequence of the problematic and reductionist implementation of the Bologna Process, which has created an uneven basis for any comparison of the quality of education provided by different faculties educating teachers.

In an analysis conducted by Miovska-Spaseva et al. (2018), there are differences in the implementation of ITE programmes at different faculties. For example, there are different numbers of contact hours and credits for same subjects at different faculties, as well as differences in subject status (mandatory or elective). Furthermore, there are different pathways to becoming a teacher depending on the grade level and/or taught subject. Primary school teachers are educated in the faculties of pedagogy, but also in faculties in different disciplines (faculties for mathematics and science, of philology, fine arts, etc.). Subject teachers can enter the profession through either direct training to teach (acquiring 240 ECTS credits) or through an additional pedagogical qualification at a faculty that does not specifically train teachers (acquiring 240 + 30 ECTS credits). This second option means that candidates take a few extra exams (i.e. in psychology, pedagogy, and teaching methodology) which qualify them to teach the specific subject at primary and secondary levels. What this ultimately contributes to are differences in the types of competences teachers acquire in the course of their ITE. Subject teachers are better experts in the subject areas that they teach, but have limited pedagogical skills or understanding of teaching methods; conversely, primary school teachers are better at creating a stimulating learning environment, but are not as skilled at all subjects or subject-specific teaching methodologies.

Study programmes for ITE, at both teaching and subject faculties, must be approved by the Board of Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education in North Macedonia. There is a series of laws and rules stipulated by the National Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia to verify whether or not a study programme fulfils the conditions necessary to educate future teachers: the Law for Higher Education, no. 35/8, 103/08, 26/09, 83/09, 99/09, 115/10, 17/11, 51/11, 15/13; the Decree for Norms and Standards for Establishing Higher Education Activity, no.103/10; the Rulebook for the Organisation, Work, Decision-Making Model, Accreditation and Evaluation

Methodology, and other issues under the mandate of the Board for Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions, no. 151/12; the Rulebook for Mandatory Components Required from Study Programmes from the First, Second, and Third Study Cycle, no. 25/11; and Instructions for Criteria and Quality Assurance Method of Higher Education Institutions and Academic Staff in the Republic of Macedonia, no. 67/13. These documents encompass all matters related to ITE, from the technical aspects of providing education (e.g. teaching space, financing, staffing, and programme structures at different study routes) to the curricular aspects (e.g. offered subjects, syllabi, compliance with national curricula across faculties, research opportunities for students, selection and graduation criteria, and programme descriptors).

There are marked structural and programmatic differences between the study programmes that are offered at different subject or pedagogical faculties, at different pedagogical faculties; and between faculties offering the same disciplines/subjects. For example, subjects may have different numbers of planned contact hours, as well as status (i.e. obligatory or elective). Furthermore, some study programmes are focused on a broad, academic exploration of the subject's content, while others focus more on teaching to transfer that content and share the knowledge with pupils. What this ultimately contributes to are differences in teachers' preparedness to tackle the realities of a classroom depending on the type of institution from which they have acquired their qualifications.

From a structural perspective, faculties that implement ITE in North Macedonia face a challenge to unify the study programmes for teachers, as analysed in the *Adjustment of the Education Structure in Europe (Tuning Project)* (2006). This methodology is used by universities to (re)design, develop, conduct, and assess study programmes entering the Bologna process. The 'tuning' serves as a reference platform for different subject areas, in an effort to make study programmes comparable, compatible, and transparent.[3] Firstly, there is ambiguity regarding learning outcomes on both modalities of ITE, therefore making it difficult to formulate the teaching competences students should acquire as part of their studies. Secondly, there is an unrealistically high number of required competences, varying depending on the breadth of the subject curriculum in question, contradictory to the recommendations in the instruments which suggest six to eight competences per subject. Thirdly, there is a lack of correlation between study programmes for teachers and the evaluation of students' competences, making it difficult to specify which model of higher education content delivery would generate the best outcomes for teaching students (specifically in terms of delivering knowledge, understanding, and

skills). Lastly, the grading of students' outcomes in subject programmes is conducted through tests, essays/seminar papers, presentations, class participation, and a final exam; however, as this model is based on acquiring points for completion, rather than on the quality of that completion, there is a lack of nuance in terms of the subject mastery attained by students (Miovska-Spaseva et al. 2018).

From a programmatic point of view, another crucial issue with regard to ITE in North Macedonia is the effectiveness of the offered study programmes in terms of providing candidates with the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, and values to be effective teachers. The *Rulebook for Basic Professional Competence in Primary and Secondary Schools* stipulates professional values, knowledge, understanding, and competences in six areas:

1. Knowledge of subject matter and the education system
2. Teaching and learning (i.e. planning and preparation, implementation, evaluation, and educational differentiation to meet students' individual needs)
3. Creating a stimulating and safe learning environment
4. Social and educational inclusion
5. Communication and cooperation with families and communities
6. Professional development and professional cooperation

The comparative analysis conducted by Miovska-Spaseva et al. (2018), suggests that there are marked differences between the competences taught in the faculties of pedagogy and the competences taught in subject matter faculties. For example, the majority of the content learned by subject teachers at faculties in different subject areas (mathematics, language, etc.) prepares them with the knowledge, such as terminology and theoretical paradigms, and skills required by that subject, but not how to be effective teachers in that specific subject. Indeed, this education-focused component is often under-serviced or lacking altogether, being reduced to learning how to plan and prepare class lessons in accordance with a traditional, rather than innovative or scientifically rooted, teaching methodology to the extent required by law. This rigidity is also apparent in the lack of focus given to teaching prospective teachers how to evaluate and differentiate their own pedagogical approaches in order to meet the needs of the students in their care; instead, faculties tend to offer electives which broadly address educational psychology concepts and docimology.

At pedagogy faculties, the study programmes do address all six areas of competences, albeit with varying quality. For example, through most subjects,

teachers learn how to plan their lessons and use different teaching methods depending on content and grade level. However, the creation of a stimulating and safe learning environment is addressed only through two topics: using ICT in education and pedagogical communication. Furthermore, competences for social and educational inclusion are not reflected in the qualification path of subject teachers. These examples suggest that there is a difference between the methodology, type of training, and even the philosophy of how lower primary and subject teachers in primary and secondary schools are prepared. In summation, it is clear that initial teacher education in North Macedonian currently faces many challenges: some are in the form of residual structures and concepts from the system established during the socialist republic (1963–1991), and some are in the form of the demands of a contemporary society that changes rapidly and requires flexible, modern study programmes which follow education science and research. The rest of the problem lies in the existing complex and inert education system which struggles between the two.

Following the implementation of the Bologna Process (post-2003), the second reform that affected not only teacher education but also the country's education system on the whole was the 2007 introduction of a mandatory preparatory year to the beginning of the eight-year primary education structure for all children aged six at the start of term—transforming it into a nine-year programme (Концепција за деветгодишно основно образование и воспитание 2007). Prior to this reform, pre-primary education was not equally accessible to all children in North Macedonia due to lack of infrastructure, socio-economic inequalities, and parents' lack of awareness about the importance of early education and development. This added year is facilitated by lower primary teachers educated in one of the country's four faculties of pedagogy (i.e. Skopje, Tetovo, Bitola, or Shtip). Furthermore, primary schools are given the option for subject teachers to deliver ICT and English language classes, provided that they have been educated in the respective faculties and have completed an additional pedagogical qualification (*Law on Primary Education* 2019).

From a policy perspective, there are five laws which regulate the procedure of acquiring a teaching degree and what that qualifies teaching students to do, stipulated by the National Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia: the *Law for Higher Education;* the *Law for Primary Education* (no. 103/2008, 33/2010, 116/2010, 156/2010, 18/2011, 42/2011, 51/2011, 6/2012, 100/2012, 24/2013, 41/2014, 116/2014, 135/2014, 10/2015, 98/2015, 145/2015, 30/2016, 127/2016 and 67/2017); the *Law regulating the Teaching Academy*; the *Law for Higher Education of Educators in Pre-school, Primary, and*

Secondary Schools (no. 10/2015, 20/2015, 98/2015, 145/2015, 55/2016 and 127/2016); and the *Law for Primary and Secondary School Teachers* (no. 10/2015, 145/2015, 30/2016, 127/2016 and 67/2017). The *Law for Higher Education* overarches all higher education institutions offering teaching degrees, thus implying comparability of learning standards; however, this is mostly to do with matters such as structural, administrative aspects of the institutions' management, student quotas, and the time frame for applications. In practice, this law does very little with regard to regulating the quality of education that teachers acquire, as this falls, instead, under the autonomy of the higher education institution itself.

Decentralisation, in this sense, allows teaching institutions to create their own programmes, select staff, and award degrees, thus, at least in theory, setting standards for the quality of pre-service training, as well as criteria for the selection of students. However, practice has shown the opposite to be true: most of the students who enrol in the country's education faculties are required to have a C-grade average across all subjects upon graduating high school (i.e. equivalent to a 3.00 in a 5.00-point system), whereas other areas of study require at least a B-grade average. As such, comparatively, the selection criteria for students applying to a teaching degree amount to admitting those with average or below average grades. This situation contrasts strongly with, for example, Finland, where less than a quarter of applicants are admitted to teacher education programmes and teaching any syllabus above preschool level requires at least a master's degree (Paronen and Lappi 2018).

Understood in combination, the low selection criteria for prospective teachers and weak curricular programming in North Macedonia's education institutions—unsurprisingly—yield poor education outcomes for students. In 2015—the first year the country enrolled in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA assessment process—students in North Macedonia scored an average of 127 points below the OECD average, being surpassed by students in countries with a similar socio-economic profile, such as Serbia and Bulgaria (OECD 2018). In 2018, when North Macedonia enrolled its 15-year-old students for the second time, the results were slightly better, with an average of 88 points below the OECD average (Education GPS 2019; OECD 2019a). Despite this improvement, these results signify that the country's primary education leaves much to be desired, with the quality of teachers that the teacher education system produces being a key factor.

Faced with this situation, in 2017, the government attempted to establish greater control over standards of teachers' pre-service education by introducing the *Law for regulating the Teacher Academy*, which built upon the five laws

mentioned earlier. Based on this new law, the government established a new institution, separate from the teacher education institutions responsible for licensing future teachers: *The Teacher Academy*. The role of the Teacher Academy was intended to examine the competencies of students graduating from the faculties of education, in order to evaluate their eligibility to be employed as teachers in a public school (as stipulated in the Law for Teachers' Academy, Article 41). However, the academic community perceived this act as blatant interference with the autonomy of higher education institutions and an attack on the legitimacy of their teaching programmes (Јаневска 2019). In their view, the creation of a new institution solely for the purposes of selecting candidates and expanding their skills and knowledge in terms of innovative teaching methodologies was impractical. Instead, they argued that any such improvement would need to occur within the existing pre-service education institutions for teachers—to do otherwise would be an expensive and unnecessary exercise. Due to these objections, the 'teacher academy' concept has been frozen.

Professional Development

The poor-quality student outcomes, described in the previous chapter, with regard to OECD PISA results, imply a gap between teachers' pre-service education and the demands of the modern classroom, education trends, and labour market requirements. It has become clear that completing the mandatory four years to acquire a bachelor's degree and the negligible amount of pre-service classroom training offered to prospective teachers are not enough to thrive as a professional educator. As in most professions that closely reflect societal changes, teachers today require continuous professional development and much more flexibility than they did 30 years ago. There is no available data for North Macedonia about how many teachers are leaving the profession, but other data suggest that there is a global trend. For example, according to 2018 US Labor Department statistics, public educators in the US were leaving their profession at a rate of 83 per 10,000 each month, which is the highest rate since measurement commenced in 2001. There are differences between reported attrition rates globally—ranging from 30% to 50% in the first year (in the US, the UK, Norway, Australia, and Sweden), to less than 5% in the Netherlands and Hong Kong (Carlsson et al. 2019). As for attrition rates for teachers in North Macedonia, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is perhaps lower than elsewhere. However, this may be due to the relatively

stable status teachers have as public servants, and lenient policies regarding working hours, as opposed to general work satisfaction.

The perceptions of teachers about insufficient learning resources, skills, and knowledge at their disposal to address increasingly diversifying student learning needs are indicative of at least a moderate level of discontent (Power School 2019). One way in which teachers compensate for that which their pre-service education has not prepared them for is to become actively involved in continuous professional development. The European Commission report (2015) specifies the necessity of continuous development for teachers' professionalism, that is, providing learning support structures for teachers, providing career paths, improving teachers' competency levels, and nurturing school learning cultures. The current state of play regarding professional development in North Macedonia is that practising teachers should acquire 60 hours of in-service professional development over three academic years, 40 of which need to be accredited by the Bureau for the Development of Education (BDE) and financed through the national budget (Law for Primary and Secondary School Teachers, published in the National Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 10/2015, 145/2015, and 30/2016, Article 21). The BDE is a government institution under the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) that is in charge of devising national curricula and providing support for teachers and their professional development. However, presently, the BDE is very limited in its ability to fulfil this task due to a lack of political independence and staff to meet the professional needs of teachers. Furthermore, there is a lack of congruence between the priorities for professional development identified by the teachers in their everyday work and the BDE's identified areas (OECD 2019b).

North Macedonia's decentralisation process was envisioned as bringing a level of independence for schools to identify their own priorities and offer relevant training to their teachers in line with the specific needs of their students. However, in reality, schools have been left with minimal funding for this purpose as most of the funds available to them, both centrally and locally, are spent on school maintenance and reconstruction, subsidies for students, and salaries for teachers. In fact, the professional development of teachers does not even appear as an expenditure category recognised by the MoES. Therefore, the gap between professional needs and pre-service knowledge is mostly addressed via outside support: the civil society sector and international organisations, informal teachers' networks, and, although much more seldom, self-financed training.

However, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as the transitional process unfolded in the education system, the agency to choose teacher training

topics was reserved for the organisations offering the above-mentioned outside support, most often based on the internal project objectives approved by their funding entity. In this respect, teachers themselves have not had many opportunities to choose the topics of their own professional development. Indeed, more recently, teacher training has become more teacher-guided by, for example, soliciting the priorities they have identified as needing development in order to best serve their classrooms. Furthermore, an increasing number of teachers and practitioners in North Macedonia have become trainers as well, thus enhancing the practicality and accurately localised applicability of the taught skills, as opposed to more theoretical, technical, and abstract types of training.

In 2001, a conflict between the two majority ethnicities living in North Macedonia—Macedonians and Albanians—occurred, revealing underlying interethnic intolerance and division. The conflict was formally put to rest with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed that September, although the agreement did little to tangibly improve interethnic relations and increase integration between peoples. Nevertheless, the subsequent reforms in education—especially providing mother tongue learning for Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian students—revealed a need for more teachers to learn how to provide positive learning experiences for students from each cultural background, specifically how to mainstream interculturalism alongside teaching methodologies related to subject matter and/or learning.

External Support for Teachers' Professional Development

The competences gap between what teachers could do once they graduate from university and the requirements of a classroom in transitional and post-conflict North Macedonia have been addressed by donor projects from international institutions that have been aimed at teacher professional development. The first projects that appeared targeted early education and lower primary education. In 1994, the Step by Step Programme supported by the Open Society Institute (New York) and Georgetown University (Washington) was initially implemented and then subsequently transformed into an association of civil society organisations aimed at improving early childhood education and development through holistic intervention in preschool institutions. This meant that preschool educators were trained and mentored in new, child-centred teaching methodologies, and preschool classrooms were equipped

and transformed accordingly. The overall programming of the country's educational processes was revised in line with the Step by Step Methodology where the central pillars are interactions; family and community involvement; inclusion, diversity, and democratic values; planning and assessment; teaching strategies; learning environment; and professional development. Indeed, this transformation of North Macedonia's education system was part of the country's overall socio-political transformation post-independence. One of the changes in professional development design was focused on the greater professionalisation of the teaching profession (i.e. improving interactions, planning and assessment, teaching strategies, learning environment, and professional development), and the second included students' experiences and diverse cultural make-up in the learning process (i.e. investing in family and community involvement and inclusion, diversity, and democratic values). Arguably, the holistic design of this programme supported the development of 'extended professionalism' (Hoyle 2008) as a professional profile that seeks continuous improvement and a systematic approach to one's own profession.

While this programme approached teacher in-service education in a holistic way, other projects' objectives were to provide more specific training connected to subject matter or desired competences. For example, the Primary Education Project (PEP) by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided training to more than 16,500 teachers and more than 970 school officials to help improve students' mathematics and science skills. More specifically, the training objectives of this project were to enable teachers to improve students' critical thinking skills, to use modern ICT in order to compete in the labour market, to stimulate inquiry-based learning and creativity, and to improve school-based assessment that supports learning quality.

In the 2013–2018 period, another important project was implemented across North Macedonia: the USAID-funded Readers are Leaders project. The goal of the project was to improve early grade literacy and numeracy skills as key prerequisites for future learning. The project included a comprehensive assessment of literacy and numeracy for lower primary school students, completed in Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish, based on a sample of more than 6000 students. The assessment results were relatively low compared to international standards. The other components of the project focused on improving teachers' competences via training sessions and workshops. However, the project also incorporated school-based professional development opportunities for teachers, which was quite progressive at the time. Instead of the commonly implemented one-size-fits-all training or workshop model, the learning communities, which will be described later in more detail,

provide in-school professional collaboration which is tailored to address the needs of the involved teachers in their schools.

A particular documented area of weakness in teachers' competences is the way they assess their students. The OECD (2018) results indicate an absence of educational standards against which teachers grade their students and provide a realistic picture of students' achievements. Furthermore, these results also indicate a lack of realistic assessment of teaching quality as aiming towards improving students' educational outcomes. This is problematic because numerous studies (e.g. Canales and Maldonado 2018; Lee 2018; Didion et al. 2020) have proven the connection between teaching quality and students' learning outcomes. Consequently, policy changes need to be steered towards a competency-based merit system of teacher appraisal and providing merit-based incentives for teachers' career development, as quality teachers are the best way towards providing quality learning outcomes.

In the 2012–2016 period, USAID supported the project Teacher Professional and Career Development (TCPD), implemented by the Macedonian Civic Education Center (MCEC), which had set out to create a system focused on the professional competences and teaching standards which would serve as the basis for teachers' career advancement. This system additionally envisioned objective, clear, and transparent teacher evaluation, focused on professional development and continuous support for teachers. Among the key findings from this project was that effective appraisal systems also incorporate a learning culture by, firstly, selecting prospective teachers who have solid capacities for teaching to enter the profession, and, secondly, simultaneously providing incentives for in-service teachers to expand their levels of expertise and autonomy throughout their careers (OECD 2019b).

These projects are merely a selection of the many that have been implemented across schools in North Macedonia, so this is by no means an exhaustive list. Each fulfils two important criteria: firstly, they had a wide scope, that is, they included all schools in the country, and, secondly, they relied on cooperation with the education institutions responsible for the quality of teaching (Bureau for Development of Education), the quality of the school (State Education Inspectorate), and assessment (State Examination Centre). This scope and cooperation on an institutional level implies that part of the projects' objectives was to inform policies and practices through the relevant government bodies, as well as to devise instruments, standards, and criteria that include new provisions derived from the projects' objectives—that is, defining education outcomes and standards, assessment standards, teacher appraisal criteria, and so forth.

Additionally, these projects can be said to have had longer-term aims of building on the capacities of the staff working in these institutions to take on the professional development component after the projects had ended. Whether this was successful or not is a difficult question to answer. On the one hand, policies and practices pertaining to teachers have improved in quality and depth, albeit often perceived by teachers as representing too much regulation and additional administrative work (Joshevska 2017). On the other hand, the resources and human capital available in these institutions are insufficient to undertake the tasks mentioned. For example, the insufficient number of BDE advisors prevents them from conducting field visits and teacher supervision as frequently as is realistically required for continuous support. Furthermore, these externally provided projects have allocated funding for the training they conduct, which is often far more than schools or the government in North Macedonia can commit themselves for the professional training of teachers.

Teachers' Roles, Identities, and Professionalism

The structure of education systems in most 'developed' countries today pushes teachers to 'teach to the test', that is, to communicate only the information which is necessary for students to perform well on national or international assessments (Hargreaves 2000). This paradigm causes confusion regarding the role of the teacher and prioritises the uniformity of testing, standards, and outcomes at the expense of the realities and needs of diverse student bodies. In the Global North, the contemporary role of the teacher has changed considerably since the middle of the twentieth century (Hafsah 2017), becoming less of a (sole) source of information and more of a facilitator in the process of creating knowledge and developing skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, conflict-resolution, and higher-order thinking skills. As such, teachers today face the challenge of incorporating 'non-cognitive' skills into mainstream education, in the face of unyielding demands to 'show results' (Gabrieli et al. 2015).

These recent and current changes in the role of the teacher—which can also be viewed as an expansion of the role of the teacher as one who not only educates but also promotes students' personal growth beyond that which is entailed in the curriculum, rather than a person who teaches students to be solely good at test-taking which is the other extreme—require a different kind of professional. Specifically, educators must involve a sense of flexibility in their skill sets in order to accommodate the changing needs of both students

and the education system. In other words, today's education professionals are asked to commit to the pursuit of constant improvement and diversification of skills beyond pre-service training and beyond compartmentalised training in discrete teaching methodologies. Again, this is where Hoyle's (2008) 'extended professionalism' should be promoted as a favourable teacher profile, guiding them to cope with the dynamics of a modern classroom, the needs of students, and the narrowing of autonomy (Joshevska 2012, 2016; Joshevska and Kirandziska 2017; Underwood and Kowalczuk-Walędziak 2018). For the purposes of explanation, Hoyle (2008, p. 291) made a distinction between the 'extended' and the 'restricted' professional. Although he abandoned this later, it is still useful for making the argument here.

> A restricted professional was construed as a teacher for whom teaching was an intuitive activity, whose perspective was restricted to the classroom, who engaged little with wider professional reading or activities, relied on experience as a guide to success, and greatly valued classroom autonomy. An extended professional was construed as a teacher for whom teaching was a rational activity, who sought to improve practice through reading and through engaging in continuous professional development, who was happily collegial, and who located classroom practice within a larger social framework.

What Hoyle (2008) is describing as an 'extended professional' is a teacher who proactively develops their own learning in a sustained way and consciously views their profession within a broader socio-cultural landscape. In our view, this type of a professional profile is what ITE and policymakers should promote in order to achieve a more holistic learning experience for students that reflects the reality of the society they enter. Indeed, 2012 research interviews with teachers from North Macedonia and England, selected on the basis that they fit the 'extended professional' profile, provided an insight valuable for informing professional development programmes encouraging the development of this type of identity. They highlighted that professional development opportunities have helped them become better and more confident professionals, but that government-imposed controls and formalities restrict their creativity as teachers. In fact, despite the difference in context (English vs Macedonian teachers), most of the teachers in both countries perceive similar conditions to be restrictive in terms of their autonomy and professionalism. For example, both groups of teachers found external evaluations and inspections to be reductionistic and provide no useful information about what they need to do in order to become better teachers (Joshevska 2012).

Indeed, the question of whether or not the current education system supports—or even requires—'extended professionalism', and whether the opposite—the intuitively teaching 'restricted professional'—is the more achievable goal, remains very pertinent. The professionals Hoyle describes as 'restricted' are actually still very reliable and effective teachers; however, they function definitively within the sanctity of the classroom and school environments, seemingly detached from the socio-politics of the outside world and the corresponding proactive, independent investment in professional development. The argument for this latter, broader teacher role rests on a more deliberate investment in self-improvement, which is what professional development and connecting in practitioners' communities aim to achieve, thus providing an avenue towards redefining the teaching profession as a whole. In practice, the way to achieve this would be not only with professional improvement on a personal level, but also with collaborative action from groups of teachers who are connected in communities of practice. The main argument about the benefit of professional learning communities is that it provides a forum for professional inquiry and collaborative learning, which improves practice and teachers' professional confidence (i.e. Laal and Ghodsi 2012; Jones et al. 2013; Joshevska and Kirandziska 2017; Pregner et al. 2019).

In addition to improved practice, belonging to a professional collective arguably strengthens teachers' professionalism, which has been explored in literature at great length and in great depth using various theoretical models and definitions. Before the 1960s, in most of the Western world, the typical teacher primarily resembled an intuitive practitioner (Atkinson and Claxton 2000): isolated in the classroom, passing on knowledge in the form of a lecture, using and having access to limited resources, and focused on classroom management, with students' motivation and mastery of the course content perhaps seen as something of a secondary order (Hargreaves 2000).

As explained before, the education paradigm has changed in the last 60 years, with more student-oriented teaching now expected, which has inevitably expanded the role of teachers beyond that of simply subject matter experts. Contemporary teachers are expected to use interactive and engaging methods to accommodate the learning needs of different types of students, as well as attending to students' social, emotional, and moral needs (Hargreave and Goodson 1996; Hargreaves 2000). However, there is a marked contradiction at play: on the one hand there is the need to expand the teacher's role as outlined earlier and as supported by research (Joshevska 2012; Hauge and Wan 2019), but on the other hand, there are government regulatory systems that focus almost exclusively on students' outcomes in terms of percentiles and international test results. This fundamental contradiction causes an ambiguity

regarding the teaching role, as teachers are expected to juggle all of the demands put on them, as well as their own professional goals in the classroom.

In other words, teachers' roles keep expanding beyond being just transmitters of learning content: teachers today are required to have a variety of skills, not only in pedagogy, but also in how to address students' socio-emotional needs, helping students with different learning abilities and/or behavioural problems, counselling families, and so forth. Nevertheless, the governments around the world, pressed to see 'results', increase the demands for the universalisation of education outcomes only by what can be numerically evaluated on an international test. Arguably, this requires a redefinition of teaching quality and teachers' professional identity, critically with the two being separate entities (Joshevska 2012). While quality teaching can be described through a comprehensive list of desirable and research-based competences—such as subject mastery and using a variety of pedagogical devices and interactive methodologies—teacher quality is a much more abstract concept, incorporating personal characteristics beyond teachable competences that can be taught in traditional training models.

Professional Learning Communities

Teachers' professional identities can be strengthened through continuous professional development (CPD). There is a marked positive impact on teachers' competences that comes from effective CPD, with the most effective helping with the improvement of teachers' practice and students' learning; strengthening the social status of the teaching profession, career prospects, and even salary; as well as increasing the retention of quality staff (e.g., Bolam et al. 2005; OECD TALIS 2009; Opfer and Pedder 2010; Frost 2014). The most far-reaching CPD models promote reflection and experimentation as a key for improving practice, emphasise peer support, promote teachers' independent judgements on how to address classroom-specific needs and the achievement of their personal professional goals, encourage the extension and structuring of professional dialogue for the purpose of sharing knowledge, sustain professional development, and enable teachers to implement new knowledge based on their personal capacities (Frost 2012).

Such effective CPD models, however, have not been implemented equally worldwide. In many countries in Southeast Europe, including North Macedonia, CPD has been implemented in a fragmented fashion, covering discrete areas of expertise. One limitation of this disjointed approach is that it focuses mostly on teachers' individual professional needs rather than on

directly promoting the co-construction of knowledge and, ultimately, school-level improvement (Frost 2012). This type of approach also overlooks what Bolam et al. (2005) describe as an important need to focus on defining shared values and visions, collective responsibility for learning, reflective professional inquiry, and collaboration as key to the co-creation of knowledge. Indeed, arguably in order to create a learning environment which addresses students' needs and also provides a thriving professional environment for teachers to reflect the needs of a twenty-first-century classroom, North Macedonia needs an approach that promotes the creation of school-based, collaborative associations of teachers which devise and implement tailor-made interventions in order to address the immediate needs of their schools, then use that as the basis for informing policy, from these grassroots upward (Frost 2012).

Teacher Leadership as the Basis of Professional Learning Communities

An alternative to the PD model of training in different skills in a compartmentalised way, where somebody external decides what are the professional needs of teachers, is the concept of 'teacher leadership' as a model of school-based PD (Bangs and Frost 2011, 2012; Frost 2010, 2011, 2012). It is a promising model in that it promotes teachers' personal agency and the following of their own vision regarding classroom practice in order to inform educational reform (Frost 2012). This is an essential type of empowerment that North Macedonia needs to install in order to nurture the type of teacher professionalism that most resembles Hoyle's 'extended professional' identity (2008).

In North Macedonia, during the implementation of the recent USAID Readers are Leaders project, the established learning communities in over 90 primary schools were run on the basis of the teacher leadership methodology outlined earlier. In the context of this project, the concept of teacher leadership recognises the potential of each teacher to be an agent of change in their school, as an expansion of their existing role—that is, there is no need for a position to be specifically created in the school in order to successfully promote positive change. Furthermore, this model relies on the same pillars which underpin the 'extended professional' profile: reflection, professional enquiry, culture of learning, shared responsibility, and personal agency. As part of Readers are Leaders, the teachers were mentored by other, more experienced practitioners who helped them define challenges from their practice

and create systematic interventions utilising teacher leadership and action research methods, a combined approach defined as 'teacher-led development work'. In this process, teachers collected evidence and insights from their development projects in development portfolios. More specifically, they carried out a systematic analysis of a specific problem they were facing in their practice, which they were able to resolve through their teacher-led development work and the collaborative processes in their learning community. This practice, over time, creates a large evidence base for a variety of classroom challenges, which is invaluable as a resource to the teacher, a resource for the teaching profession, but also as an argument for substantial, meaningful education reform.

Joshevska's research (2015, 2016) into the perceptions of teachers in North Macedonia reached 341 teachers via an online survey, which enquired into the benefits of belonging to a learning community. Her findings emphasise above all else the importance of improved cooperation. This broad concept, in turn, can be broken down into initiating conversations among teachers about pedagogical practice (64%), an increased sharing of teaching techniques (55%), and an increase in the number of joint projects (43%) (Underwood and Joshevska 2019). In the latter research, teachers spoke positively about their perception of increased empowerment and self-efficacy, with one contributor explaining:

> The project allowed us to feel like leaders, to be able to identify a problem, to research it, to work on it and to think of practical solutions within a certain time. This gave us self-confidence.

Indeed, such a learning community—that is, one based on the principles of teacher leadership—provides a connection between the realities of classroom and school environments, and the knowledge and skills acquired through in-service education. Based on the experiences from implementing professional learning communities in North Macedonia in order to reconceptualise professional development of teachers and make empirically based judgements about 'what works' in their own classroom and school, there are several benefits that are worth mentioning:

- cost=effectiveness: Teacher leadership is underpinned by the idea that teachers are capable, competent, and in a perfect position to lead change as part of their existing role, with schools being in charge of classroom innovation and professional development. Thoughtful restructuring of the teacher's professional profile and area of control would increase the prospects of

sustainability, locating any restructuring within an already existing system rather than inventing new positions or structures with (substantial) financial implications.

- generation of a large evidence base: In North Macedonia, as part of the 2013–2018 Readers are Leaders project, 90 learning communities were established with a total of around 1650 members, making it one of the most widely piloted models of professional development in North Macedonia. In the academic year 2017/2018, teachers' development portfolios generated an enormous evidence base spanning locally relevant, current pedagogical issues and solutions. If these data are taken into consideration when creating new policies regarding teachers' professional development, this would serve two important principles: evidence-based reform—which is presently greatly lacking in North Macedonia—and the bottom-up informing of education policy. Arguably, these principles are the backbone of teacher leadership.
- increased democratic potential of schools: Learning communities largely rely on collaboration and dialogue between practitioners in order to find the best possible solutions to classroom-related issues. Using evidence to inform policy creates a forum for the wider participation of teachers in decision-making; using teachers' experiences and their documented data as a basis for informing reforms both necessitates and confirms the expansion of school-level and national-level capacity for democratic and participatory leadership.
- international networks and co-creation of knowledge: The interaction between community participation, especially in extended communities, and the sharing of knowledge includes a focus on types of knowledge shared and the different values that teachers put upon these. In effective professional learning communities, it is acknowledged that different forms of knowledge are shared, including knowledge of specific classroom strategies, knowledge of approaches to lesson design, and knowledge of underpinning values regarding teaching (Underwood and Kowalczuk-Walędziak 2018). Sharing this knowledge in an ongoing discourse creates and affirms the teaching community and its members.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter North Macedonia has been presented as a country that has undergone a prolonged and disruptive socio-political transition over the past three decades. There are historic pressures shaping the nature of education in the country and current pressures on teachers to develop and change their professional practice rapidly, all within a context of limited resources on a national level. With the rise of globalisation and the implementation of the Bologna Process, North Macedonia has also been influenced by external trends, including the codification of teaching standards and participation in international league tables (i.e. OECD PISA assessments), even though the results of these are not affirming. Additionally, North Macedonia has relied on the guidance of projects implemented by international aid organisations such as the Open Society Institute, EU Commission, UNICEF, USAID, and World Bank to intervene in education practices and inform education reform to the extent possible. On the one hand, this has brought significant gains in terms of professional development with the most effective affirming teachers and building communities, but, on the other, has risked undermining the potential of teachers themselves to effect change locally. On a discourse level, involvement in teacher-led development work and teacher leadership projects has brought a conversation around empowerment in North Macedonia, with this empowerment reflected in teachers who have embraced the global and local challenges of engaging in an increasingly complex professional role of being a teacher in the twenty-first century. With these developments has also come the generation of a wealth of fruitful data regarding the effectiveness of teacher-led development projects, thus providing a robust basis for future progress.

Going forwards, teacher education in North Macedonia faces distinct challenges. Some of these are the challenges of building an effective education system within an unstable economy, while others are of ensuring education quality during a time of societal, political, and environmental change. Ultimately, the solution we propose—teacher leadership as the basis of professional learning communities—has grown from our own experiences in such projects. Fundamentally, this relies on the concept that each teacher can be the leader of initiatives that answer the specific needs of their classroom or school without the need for creating a special position in the school for classroom innovation, or external expertise for identification of the challenges which are typical for that specific context. For that to work, intervention is needed at the level of central government: giving teachers and schools greater

autonomy to define their own needs and to encourage them to collaborate around finding solutions in order to open up a lasting communication channel with the teachers and use that data to inform education reform. This solution is not entirely new and, as this chapter has identified, some existing projects and approaches do just this: handing agency to teachers and schools affirms and empowers them, fully acknowledging their capacity to lead positive change.

Notes

1. https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/early-childhood-education.
2. In North Macedonia, preschool is not mandatory and there is a lack of preschool institutions across the country.
3. It is important to note that in the foreword of this document, it is emphasised that the intention of the provided methodology is not to impose uniformity among higher education institutions.

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