

LEADING CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION: THE CASE OF KOSOVO

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore curriculum implementation practice in ten Kosovo schools, and to outline main strategies devised to enhancing school-based activities. Practical approaches utilized for school-based successful curriculum implementation are investigated, and efforts of educational leaders in envisioning and leading the curriculum change and implementation in Kosovo schools are highlighted. Different conceptions of success and successful curriculum implementation from the perspective of participants shall be examined. Within the context of ten schools, this case study approach involves school principals, teachers, curriculum coordinators, municipal education officials, and Ministry of Education officials. Three methods of data collection shall be applied using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and a document analysis. Finally, this study is an attempt to exploring different participant perceptions and realities related to the role of leadership role in supporting policy curriculum implementation in ten pilot schools in Kosovo.

Keywords: Education, curriculum, leadership, policy, change.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is in an attempt to explore major educational policy developments in the Kosovo education over the last two decades that influenced curriculum implementation. The extent to which educational policies affect leadership practice and local educators' subsequent thinking about the role of education deserve particular attention and require thorough analysis. Finally, the study aims to explore different participant perceptions and realities related to leadership role in successfully leading curriculum implementation in ten pilot schools in Kosovo.

1.1. Background of the study

Following the end of the war in 1999 in Kosovo, and in light of the substantial and continuing donor support, efforts were directed toward re-designing education and expanding access to education. More schools were built and existing ones renovated; curricula were designed and teachers and school leaders started to be trained. In an attempt to transform school realities, the Kosovo school system was subject to ongoing curriculum reform. The 2001 Kosovo Curriculum Framework (MEST, 2001) was considered a significant step towards this goal. The education system was involved in another curriculum review process, approved in 2011 as a New Curriculum Framework (MEST, 2011a) and it was planned as a further step towards reaching the target of education transformation. Despite these developments, there is a lack of an effective approach and a standardized policy implementation framework to underpin educational leadership practice in support of curriculum implementation in Kosovo. Furthermore, professional development efforts from 2001 to 2015 lacked systematic, evidence-based assessment of the actual impact it had on school development practice in Kosovo (Saqipi, 2014).

2. CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN KOSOVO

The first Curriculum Framework used in post-conflict Kosovo was developed in 2001 by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) Department of Education, and supported by UNICEF. The aim was to set the foundation for the coherent and quality functioning of the education system based on the principles of learner-centred instruction, flexibility and inclusion. This curriculum specified that learning experiences should not only focus on information, but also provide for the development of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. The biggest obstacle in the implementation of this curriculum was the fact that it was never officially approved in its final version. However, this curriculum framework served as a reference for developing school programs and textbooks to be used in post-conflict Kosovo.

While this framework identified knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, it neither paid sufficient attention to how they would be taught in schools nor addressed teacher practice and beliefs. Textbooks served as the basis for curriculum implementation and school-based practice. This was another obstacle since textbook authors were primarily academics and consequently teachers' voices and practical examples from schools were minimally included in textbooks, and in many cases ignored altogether.

An initial assessment conducted by the London Institute of Education in 2005 (Peffer et al., 2005) outlined challenges of Kosovo school system in delivering modern teaching pedagogy, learning and assessment practices while at the same time recognizing the good ground that had been established for ensuring changes in teaching and learning. The general assessment had been that the 2001 curriculum did not succeed in changing teaching and learning practices to the expected level, whereas donor support had been extensive within the overall international efforts to develop Kosovar post-conflict society.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education in Kosovo released a second draft of the new curriculum framework. The new curriculum promotes a competency-based approach that is to be developed through practice-oriented teaching and learning. The major shift from a content-based to a competency-based curriculum aims to mobilize the potential of Kosovar youth to compete successfully in the labour market, handle the challenges of the digital age effectively and develop the knowledge, skills and attributes required for the twenty-first century world (MEST, 2011a, p. 16). The goal of the new

curriculum framework is to find the most effective means to maximize the potential of the growing number of young educated children in a way that will bring about desired improvements in Kosovar society and align these improvements with the advancements and developments that are occurring in EU countries.

3. PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The problem addressed in this study is the lack of understanding of the role of educational leaders, at central, municipal or school level, in supporting successful curriculum implementation in pilot schools. The extent to which supportive strategies are developed, made available to schools and utilized by school principals, teachers and curriculum leaders will be explored and interpreted as perceived by participants in this study. How do schools in Kosovo experience successful implementation of the new national curriculum during the piloting phase, and what are the leadership issues arising from these experiences?

Four issues have been identified for further inquiry. The first issue is related to exploring strategies devised to successfully lead and implement the new curriculum in piloting schools in Kosovo; secondly, examining practical school-based approaches utilized in successfully piloting curriculum implementation; thirdly, exploring efforts of educational leaders in envisioning and leading the curriculum implementation in Kosovo schools, and lastly, the need to explore different conceptions of success and successful curriculum implementation from the perspective of participants representing educational leaders, education experts and practicing teachers.

Four questions are planned to frame this inquiry.

1. How do school principals and teachers devise strategies to lead and implement the new curriculum successfully at the school level?
2. What strategies and approaches currently applied in leading and implementing the new curriculum provide for school-based policy implementation practice?
3. How do the Ministry of Education and the municipal education authorities envision and lead the curriculum implementation process in Kosovo schools?
4. What are participant perceptions for successful educational policy (curriculum) implementation at the school level?

3.1. Significance of the Study

A first significance of the study is to offer insight and clarity into the strategies devised to lead and implement the new curriculum successfully at the school level. The ten pilot schools, with some support from the central Ministry of Education and Municipal Education authorities, are expected to plan implementation of the new curriculum by involving selected teachers and particular grades. Within Kosovo's current educational context, successful curriculum implementation is a key focus, and it would seem prudent that the main focus for pilot schools is on supporting planning for and developing curriculum implementation practice at the school level.

A second significance of this study is that it will provide an approach for school-based policy implementation practice from which principals and municipal education authorities can develop strategies to lead, develop and implement successfully the new curriculum. Historically, schools were provided a "ready-made" curriculum and there was no requirement or expectation to adapt curriculum to school specifics or student learning needs. As a result, schools and school systems generally lacked professional development with a focus on school-based implementation practice.

A third significance of this study is that it will highlight efforts of educational leaders in envisioning and leading the curriculum implementation in Kosovo schools. It provides an opportunity to further explore the aim of the new curriculum, what is foreseen and how the curriculum reform is led at the central level. Since the previous curriculum was never approved, municipalities never had responsibility to implement it. Therefore, exploring the role of educational leaders at the municipal level becomes critical to informing the implementation process.

Finally, the knowledge attained through this study will be useful to guide leadership practice, policy implementation, and research throughout Kosovo schools. It is hoped that this study will provide

conceptions of success and successful curriculum implementation from the perspective of participants representing educational leaders and practicing teachers.

4. INITIAL THEMES FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

This study is in an attempt to explore the educational policy implementation scene by exploring the extent to which education reform developments with regards to the new curriculum implementation have affected the leadership practice and thinking about the role of education leaders in Kosovo. Different participant perceptions and realities related to leadership roles in supporting successful curriculum implementation shall be explored and discussed.

Aspects of *policy implementation practice* and the role of education leaders are important for this study. Fullan (2008) and Sahlberg (2011) referred to the role of change leaders in organizations aiming to create a culture of leadership that engages teachers to be members of teams leading policy implementation at the school level. It is what happens in and with schools that matter most. Leana (2011) highlighted the role of the highly skilled individual teachers and the benefits from teacher collaborations, supported by the municipal and central education authorities, which affect and strengthen school's competence and ability to successfully implement overall reforms.

The aspect of *leading successful curriculum reform* process, what works and what doesn't work well, at the school and system level, will be explored in this study. Leana (2011) and Sahlberg (2011) indicate that countries intending to reform school systems, and successfully implement new policies, have at least three important factors to consider, such as: (1) the power of the collective work where teaching staff is engaged in school reform collectively; (2) successful school reforms are led within whereby trust and open communication among teaching staff are the bases of real reform attempts; and (3) the critical role of school principals in supporting teacher reform efforts by ensuring professional development opportunities are created to and for them, and that external relations with stakeholders are built consistently.

It is important to explore the role of *education governance structures* and how those structures support the process. The ongoing transfer of responsibilities from the central to the municipal level characterizes the current structural reforms in Kosovo. As the new curriculum is competency-based, which represents major challenges for teachers and school principals, the role of municipal authorities, leaders at the local level, have increased and thus become more complex. Examples of educational structures, central, local and school structures, from Scotland, Finland, Slovenia and Austria have strongly affected changes in Kosovo. Applicability and adaptability remains to be further explored when gathering data from participants in this study.

Finally, exploring different conceptions of success and successful curriculum implementation at the school level becomes critical to understanding the current situation with regards to *school-based professional learning communities* and the role of leaders in this process. Leithwood (2006, 2007, 2012) and Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) maintained that school-based professional learning teams are comprised of a variety of individuals within an organization. Having a balance that represents the entire community and the years of experience with the organization are both important factors to consider. School principals, teachers, and the support staff must work towards a common goal to utilise advantages of student-centred learning and thus improve student achievement. It is essential that school-based professional learning community members, and teams, work together to carefully collect data that belong to all, and the results, good or bad, belong to the entire school. Therefore, creating the right group dynamics is one strategy that school leaders must think about carefully.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, 2013) referred to the role of professional capital as fundamental to transforming teaching in schools and school systems in many parts of the world. More specifically, when it comes to school-based teams, they articulate the "importance for professional work, professional capacity, and professional effectiveness" to improving student learning and achievement (Hargreaves, & Fullan, 2013, p.36). School-based professional learning communities require more attention and support from local school and municipal leaders, but also from central education leaders and larger political and societal stakeholders. Schools that focus on building strong relationships help to create a strong community. Leithwood et al. (2004) found this to be especially true in schools where students and teachers work in challenging environments, and thus students yearn for a sense of

belonging and build trust with teachers who are able to create a sense of community. Teachers must hold consistently high expectations for all students and work tirelessly to support their continued growth in achievement. A strong school community creates a “sense of self-efficacy” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 54) where students are empowered to set and achieve high goals for learning.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a case study research project involving participants from ten curriculum-pilot schools in Kosovo. These are the first schools currently piloting the new Kosovo curriculum since 2013. They represent all pre-university education levels in Kosovo including elementary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools. The audience for this study is determined to be a sample of participants representing principals, teachers, curriculum coordinators, a group of municipal education officers, and Ministry of Education officials.

In this study I plan to involve a selected sample of participants from three curriculum-pilot schools in Kosovo. These are three of the initial ten schools piloting the new Kosovo curriculum since 2013. They represent all pre-university education levels in Kosovo including elementary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools. Furthermore, these schools represent a mixture of urban and rural schools. The participating group is comprised of **3** principals, **3** curriculum coordinators, **12** teachers, **3** municipal education officers, and **3** Ministry of Education officials.

Case study, as a qualitative methodology, allows key issues to emerge through the collection and analysis of data. As such, I propose to utilize qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with **6** participants, focus group discussions with **18** participants, and document analysis. A total of **24** participants will be part of this study. This methodology ensures that experiences of participants, teachers and educational leaders, are explored through multiple aspects of leading curriculum implementation as the main phenomenon of research.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

When selecting subjects for this case study, I chose to interview participants who have been part of piloting the new curriculum in Kosovo in 2012-2015. These participants have had various roles in planning and developing the new curriculum at the central level. They also have had a role in planning and leading implementation at the school level. Therefore, embarking on this research study, I acknowledge that I have certain assumptions as follows:

- Education leaders at different levels have made sure the process of curriculum development and implementation is well prepared.
- School principals, teachers, curriculum leaders, municipal education officers, and Ministry officials will be agreeable to participate in this study; they will be open to responding to questions included in semi-structured interviews.
- Sufficient support is provided to schools to successfully implement the new curriculum.
- There is a clear vision and rationale as to why the new curriculum was introduced by the Ministry of Education and the implementation process is well considered and managed.
- All participants in this study share a common conception of successful curriculum implementation and as such it underpins the vision and commitment to implement it in all Kosovo schools.

7. LIMITATIONS

Creswell (2007) referred to limitations as conditions that are out of the researcher’s control and may have an impact on the results of a study. In this study, I will have no control over whether or not the participants’ responses to interview questions are honest as personal perceptions and beliefs factor highly in qualitative research. Participants may choose to give an answer they deem as correct, or a response that they believe I may want to hear. Although participants are selected for their roles as educational leaders and teachers responsible to lead and implement the new curriculum, there are limitations as to their backgrounds, professional development experience, knowledge, and academic education. Because schools and municipalities are environments of numerous cultural, contextual and political influences, participants’ views, observations, and interpretations may be impacted and

constrained. Furthermore, participants may refuse, choose to withdraw from the study at any time, or decide not to take part in the focus group discussion.

Accessibility of documents outlining the development process, planning and leading curriculum implementation, and the specific role of leaders, may be limited or unavailable in the desired quantity, or it may be only available in the Albanian language. The number of participants invited to be part of this study is quite large, and they come from ten piloting schools, which are assumed to have received similar support in this process. Although these limitations exist, the research findings do reflect the opinion, thoughts, and ideas of a sample of school principals, teachers, curriculum coordinators, municipal education officers, education experts, and Ministry of Education officials in Kosovo.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper briefly introduces the context and the history of the education system in Kosovo. It highlights the major developments in post-conflict Kosovo particularly focusing on development of curriculum and leading education reforms. It states the key questions for research and an overview of research methodology. Preliminary themes for an initial discussion with participants during data collection process are introduced and further analysis and review will be included in later stages of this study. Finally, a description of a case study methodology planned to explicitly explore the questions guiding this inquiry, approaches utilized to design this case study research, and methods of data collection were highlighted and briefly explained.

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