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## Leveraging Synergy Between Professionalism and Development to Succeed in Teaching: A Theoretical-Empirical Review

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### Abstract

The teaching profession faces increasingly complex challenges as educational demands evolve in the 21st century. One of the primary issues teachers encounter is the need to continuously enhance professionalism while engaging in ongoing professional development. This study aims to analyze the synergy between professionalism and professional development within the context of teaching as a profession, as well as how this synergy can be optimized to improve teacher performance and success. The research employs a theoretical and empirical review that combines literature analysis with case studies. This study identifies key concepts in professionalism and professional development and explores the relationship between them through empirical data gathered from surveys and interviews with teachers across various educational levels. The findings reveal a significant correlation between the level of professionalism and engagement in professional development programs with the quality of teaching. Teachers who are actively involved in professional development tend to perform better, are more adaptable to curriculum changes, and are more capable of addressing challenges in teaching. Additionally, the study finds that the synergy between professionalism and professional development enhances teacher motivation, strengthens their commitment to the profession, and ultimately has a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Educational Synergy, Professional Development, Teacher Performance, Teacher Professionalism, Teaching Quality*

### A. Introduction

Progressing from fulfilling the entry requirement of the all-graduate teaching force to attaining the esteemed status of the profession, teachers undergo a protracted and multifaceted process, which, from a definitional standpoint, is professionalization mainly manifested by professional development (PD) (Evetts, 2014). However, teacher professionalization through PD, encompassing the formation of professional identities, is intricate, and thus, it is imperative for teachers to continually refine their professionalism for the appropriate trajectories for their PD (Dahl, 2020). Yet, rather than a unidirectional transfer of benefits from professionalism to PD, reciprocity between the parties involved should be accentuated, as PD provides a robust foundation for the enhancement of professionalism (Sachs, 2016). Therefore, this paper aims to substantiate this hypothesis both theoretically and empirically, utilizing a combination of literature review and interviews with two educators: this course instructor (Tat Sir), who possesses extensive experience in secondary school teaching, and my four-year experienced FE mentor (Mr. Wong). Also, my consolidation of teacher professionalism defined in the former assignment and new insight emerging from its harmonious interplay with PD will be unveiled through the following discussion.

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The teaching profession currently faces increasingly complex challenges as educational demands evolve in the 21st century. A primary issue for teachers is how to maintain and enhance their professionalism while simultaneously engaging in ongoing professional development. Despite the recognized importance of both aspects, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of how the synergy between professionalism and professional development can be optimized to improve teacher performance and success. This gap in understanding may lead to ineffective professional development programs, which could ultimately have a negative impact on teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Therefore, this research aims to explore the relationship between professionalism and professional development in the context of teaching and to identify ways to maximize the synergy between these two elements to strengthen teachers' performance and commitment to their profession.

Previous studies have made significant contributions to understanding the relationship between professionalism and professional development in the educational context. For instance, Evans (2008) analyzed the concepts of professionalism and professionalism within education, highlighting the importance of professional development as a means to enhance educational quality. Borko (2004) focused on the impact of professional development on teacher learning, exploring how these programs improve teachers' ability to navigate the ever-evolving challenges of education. Day and Sachs (2004) provided a comprehensive review of teacher professional development across various countries, identifying best practices and challenges in its implementation. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) emphasized the role of reflection in professional growth, discussing how deep reflection can significantly enhance professional development. Meanwhile, Desimone (2009) proposed improved models for measuring the impact of professional development on teaching quality, stressing the importance of teacher engagement and institutional support. While these studies have underscored the importance of both professionalism and professional development in improving teaching quality and student outcomes, they often treat these two aspects as separate entities. Many of these studies also focus more on describing professional development programs or measuring their impact rather than deeply exploring how the synergy between professionalism and professional development can be optimized. The state of the art in this current study lies in its holistic approach to exploring the synergistic relationship between professionalism and professional development. It not only identifies the correlation between these elements but also investigates how this synergy can be leveraged to enhance teacher motivation, commitment to the profession, and overall teaching quality. By integrating theoretical reviews with empirical data from various educational levels, this study offers a more integrative perspective and provides practical recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions to design more effective and comprehensive professional development programs.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the synergistic relationship between professionalism and professional development within the context of teaching as a profession. Specifically, the study aims to explore how these two aspects interact and contribute to teachers' success and teaching quality in the modern educational landscape. To achieve this, the study has several specific objectives: first, to assess the impact of professionalism on teachers' engagement in professional development programs, determining how professionalism influences participation and commitment to ongoing professional growth. Second, it seeks to analyze the effect of involvement in professional development on teaching quality and student learning outcomes, focusing on how active participation in professional development activities affects teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Third, the study aims to explore the synergistic mechanisms between professionalism and professional development that can enhance teachers' motivation and commitment to their profession, identifying ways in which the synergy between these aspects can boost teacher dedication. Finally, the study intends to provide practical recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers on designing and

implementing effective and integrated professional development programs, offering guidance to create comprehensive programs that address teachers' needs and improve overall educational outcomes.

This study, titled "Leveraging Synergy Between Professionalism and Development to Succeed in Teaching: A Theoretical-Empirical Review," argues that the success of teaching as a profession depends on effectively integrating professionalism and professional development. Professionalism establishes high standards for teachers' conduct and performance, while professional development equips them with new skills and adapts them to educational innovations. The study posits that these elements are interdependent; professional development programs are more effective when grounded in a strong foundation of professionalism. Empirical evidence shows that teachers actively engaged in professional development demonstrate better performance, adaptability, and improved student outcomes, highlighting the critical role of this synergy. By combining theoretical insights with empirical data, the study aims to reveal how an integrated approach can enhance teacher motivation, commitment, and educational results.

## **B. Methods**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both theoretical and empirical approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the synergy between professionalism and professional development within the teaching profession. The research begins with an extensive literature review to identify key concepts and theoretical frameworks related to professionalism and professional development. This theoretical foundation guides the subsequent empirical phase, which involves data collection through surveys and interviews with teachers across various educational levels. The survey, designed to measure teachers' levels of professionalism, engagement in professional development programs, and perceptions of teaching quality and student outcomes, is administered to a representative sample of educators. Additionally, in-depth interviews are conducted to gain qualitative insights into teachers' personal experiences with professionalism and professional development. Data analysis involves both quantitative and qualitative techniques: quantitative data from surveys are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify relationships between variables, while qualitative data from interviews are analyzed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and themes. The findings from both data sources are then integrated to enhance the understanding of how professionalism and professional development interact and contribute to teaching success. This methodological approach aims to offer a thorough examination of how these two elements can be optimized to improve teaching quality and educational outcomes.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **1. Self-Directed PD**

Imagine that teachers merely passively receive PD for meeting the soft training targets set by the Education Bureau and opportunities for salary increments or promotion opportunities. If so, there seems to be no difference between teachers and students who study for the fulfillment of compulsory education and scholarships without their minds' liberation. But we will not call them professions. Ergo, teachers' PD should be built upon a certain degree of agency-driven self-educational foundations (Lopes & D' Ambrosio, 2016). Then the crucial question becomes: what factors stimulate teacher agency, and what distinct professional behaviors and professional self-understanding are led by PD (Kelchtermans, 2009)? In other words, how does professionalism undergo transformation through PD?

The development of professional self and professional know-how contributes to a completed PD (ibid.). However, during my review of literature and interview transcripts, I surprisingly noticed that professional knowledge development (PKD) is intertwined with professional identity development, necessitating an integrated analysis instead of parallel expositions. Consequently, my emphasis will lie on the progression of professional knowledge, which, as articulated by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (2008), encompasses pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, generalized educational approaches based on learners' capabilities and characteristics, and ethical beliefs. Meanwhile, I will show its reciprocal influence on the professional identity, thereby illuminating the interplay between PD and professionalism and delineating the evolutionary latter. To facilitate this discussion seamlessly, I will employ Dall'Alba & Sandberg's (2006) two dimensions of PKD: the horizontal dimension encompassing knowledge and skill augmentation; and the vertical dimension involving alterations in the understanding of practice.

## **2. Horizontal PKD**

The professional identity, deeply ingrained by one's perception of the nature of good education and the moral commitment to students (Kelchtermans, 2009), plays a critical role in shaping teachers' agency in PKD, as evidenced by:

*The knowledge of ICT evolves so rapidly... But the textbooks cannot be updated to keep pace. I know my students will not learn by themselves. So I have to search for fresh information myself. Otherwise, students may struggle in the chapter of Social Implications and SBA. I do not think this should appear in qualified education... (Mr. Wong)*

Apart from the moral aspect, teacher identity, as a combination of personal and professional self (Dunne, 2011), promotes teachers' agency to search for broadening information to establish a more life-related classroom:

*Perhaps due to my personal inclination and the nature of civic education, my teacher identity is to cultivate students as citizens in real-life situations. So I intentionally incorporate the current social issues I search for in my PowerPoints, aspiring to instill in students a sense of humanistic concern. (Tat Sir)*

Synthesizing the sharing of the above interviewers, teachers' moral commitment to education, guided by their professional and self-identity, as well as the altruistic concern for students implied by professionalism (Helsby, 1999), drive teachers' self-directed PKD, which not only expands their professional knowledge but, more importantly, fosters their habitual agency to stay abreast of emerging trends by being their own researchers, which is a necessary professional literacy for practicing professionalism in a fluid environment (Sachs, 2016). For instance, Mr. Wong initially searched for supplementary resources because of the absence of the inherent knowledge of past papers' questions in the textbooks. Over time, this became a routine practice during his lesson preparation, enabling his students' better performance than their peers.

Notably, an inspiration arose from the interviewee that, in addition to enabling teachers to fulfill professional ethics by avoiding misleading students, the knowledge acquired through PKD enhances teachers' self-efficacy, which empowers them to make informed decisions about the depth of coverage of specific topics for their utility to students and, in turn, may reinforce teacher's professional identity of interpreting the everyday world for students and agency to engage in PKD. However, it is worth thinking about what would happen if teachers, under the "teaching-to-the-test" pressure, subscribed to their autonomy for sitting students for DSE by giving up integrating the knowledge gained from PKD, which might not be included in examinations, in their teaching practices. The possible result is that, over time, their passion for interpreting the world with students based on PKD may decline. Hence, the motivation towards ongoing PD is contingent upon teachers' autonomy (Wermke et al., 2019).

Professional identity and professionalism are dynamic processes that reinforce existing beliefs and have the potential for reconstruction. Thus far, we have examined the horizontal dimension of PD aligned with the existing professional identity and its impact on reinforcing professionalism. It is now germane to explore the vertical dimension of PKD, which encompasses the fluid nature of professional identity and professionalism.

### 3. Vertical PKD

Apart from a technical endeavor to acquire knowledge and skills, PKD entails the practical integration of new insights with already-held beliefs and knowledge (Kelchtermans, 2009). These new insights refer to what was gained through the horizontal process as well as the conscious reflection on practices in the teaching context. In this regard, vertical PKD can be understood as two reflective teaching processes: practicalizing theoretical knowledge and theorizing practical knowledge (Tsui, 2009).

The practical application of theoretical knowledge removes the label of teachers as non-professionals, who merely convey knowledge from scholars to students. Instead, it further leads to a critical-agency-oriented process of making informed professional judgments about the suitability of theoretical knowledge for enhancing instructional efficacy based on their beliefs and students' needs, referring to Mr. Wong:

*During the pandemic, I learned many electronic educational tools, and they indeed helped my online lessons. So when transitioning back to physical classrooms, I tried to use them. However, I began judging its usefulness when I needed to waste the classroom time to let them log in to Kahoot, which functions the same as pen-and-paper testing.*

It seems that post-practice reflection enables teachers to increase critical sophistication upon the held beliefs of professional know-how embedded. Furthermore, let me extend this theoretical knowledge to "policies." Take FE supervision, where using technologies is one of its assessment items, as an example. To fulfill this requirement, I used the iPad to teach the whole lesson. Yet, I found that my students could not remember the formula flashing on my iPad, making me realize the benefits of IT blended with blackboards for engagement and memorability. This incident prompts me to reflect on the relationship between adaptability and flexibility in practicing professionalism. As transformative professionalism asks teachers to be policy-active (Sachs, 2003), I should engage in horizontal PKD; however, I should also participate in vertical PKD to make flexible adjustments to maximize learning outcomes, through which I can add a new element to my defined professionalism: critical-agency-guided professional judgement.

Conversely, theorizing practical knowledge empowers teachers to form their specialized knowledge on effective pedagogical strategies tailored to specific classes or topics by regularly examining student learning, as shown in:

*When teaching a subject in more than one class, I automatically engage in introspection of the strengths and weaknesses in my delivery, which directs me to seek ways for adjustment and improvement for teaching this topic in another class. (Tat Sir)*

Through reflective teaching, whose core is that teachers learn from students, teachers' own pedagogy (content) knowledge base is enriched, and teachers are moving towards expert teachers (Tsui, 2009). Beyond this, teachers' professional identity may also be negotiated in the reflective process, leading to creative insubordination to align their instructional practices with students' learning abilities and well-being (Lopes & D' Ambrosio, 2016). Use my FE experience to project some new teachers. Bearing the teacher identity as making every student equally intelligent, I tried to set the same learning objectives for students from different levels. However, it failed, leading to negative emotions and decreased job motivation for the lower-performing class. How can these immature teachers grow into professional teachers? It may refer to Tat Sir's response, which is to negotiate teacher identity into "helping students achieve what they can

achieve," inspiring his creative insubordination as content adjustments based on students' capabilities, as well as incorporating some out-of-syllabus items to establish a positive classroom atmosphere. Gradually, this practical creative inordination may become teachers' subjective education theory to make professional adjustments in teaching across different levels of classes. Yet, it again depends on the empowerment of autonomy in teachers. Honoring the page limit, this discussion primarily focuses on PKD. However, I could not find a better way to exemplify the complex interplay between professionalism and PD, which I will use as the conclusion of this paper.

#### **4. External-Boosted PD**

In addition to individualized efforts, teachers can harness the power of external sources, such as fellow teachers, parents, and community partners, to foster their PD (Zhou, 2013) and enact collaborative professionalism.

However, the impetus for teachers' PD thrives under supportive organizational conditions within schools (Tang & Choi, 2009), meaning that schools need to cultivate an environment that encourages both individual PD and collaborative PD. Through this, teachers may gain new and practical insights in, for example, according to the interviewee, teaching methods, how to maintain good relationships with students and parents, and how to deal with discipline problems, where diverse professional knowledge, professional ethics, and professional identities clash to take professionalism to new heights. It is also worth noticing that positive teachers' occupational culture can preserve teachers' resilience (Connell, 2009) by sharing emotional understanding and the passion towards education, so as to positively influence teachers' commitment to exercising agency (Qin et al., 2023) for the strive for continuous PD to teach to the best (Day & Gu, 2014).

Moreover, fostering teacher professionalism results from persistent efforts by individuals and policymakers (Liu et al., 2021), indicating that apart from the aforementioned self-directed "bottom-up" PD, policymakers or relevant stakeholders may adjust its de-professionalization policies and actions. For instance, in designing the undergraduate education courses as well as the in-service training programs, attention should be paid to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic teaching situations. Additionally, responding to the aforementioned autonomy functioning as fundamental to professional practice, though it sounds impossible to change the exam-oriented system in a short time, it may be worth reevaluating the policies stressing compliance and accountability, which result in teachers' being risk averse in decision-making and sinking into society-perceived technical machine (Sachs, 2016).

To conclude, my understanding of the relationship between professional development and professionalism is intertwined: Professional identity, professional ethics, and intimate collaborative partnerships provide teachers with the resilient agency to engage in professional development, where reflective teaching is executed to make professional judgements depending on autonomy. In my future, undergoing continuous professional development, I believe I can freshen the inherence of my teacher professionalism, which is characterized by fluid professional identity, extensive professional knowledge, professional ethics, critical agency towards reflective teaching, autonomous professional decision-making, and collaboration, to contribute to the restoration of the dignity of teaching as a profession, which in turn enhances my commitment to active agency to thrive in the teaching profession. The cycle comes back to the start.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The successful integration of professionalism and professional development is crucial for enhancing the quality of teaching and overall educational outcomes. The research highlights that professionalism provides a strong foundation for teachers' ethical conduct, commitment, and

pursuit of excellence, while professional development offers the necessary tools and knowledge to adapt to evolving educational demands. The synergy between these two elements creates a dynamic environment where teachers are not only more effective in their roles but also more motivated and committed to their profession. Empirical evidence from the study shows that teachers who actively engage in professional development tend to perform better, are more adaptable to curriculum changes, and positively impact student learning outcomes. The study underscores the importance of designing integrated professional development programs that align with the principles of professionalism, thereby maximizing their effectiveness. Overall, this review provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions, advocating for a holistic approach that leverages the interplay between professionalism and professional development to foster success in teaching.

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