Online Education: Influencing Teachers’ Perception of Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism is an important factor for maintaining the quality of teaching and learning. Despite the large shift in the nature of teaching and learning, due to the rise of digital influences, the perception of professionalism remains a relevant and essential concept in the field of education. This exploratory case study presents the results of a survey aimed at understanding mathematics teachers’ perceptions of professionalism and its relationship with self-efficacy and job satisfaction. The results indicate that mathematics teacher perceptions of their interpersonal relationships with the students significantly influence their perception of professionalism in teaching. We argue that in the age of globalization and the increasing influence of technology in the classroom, the interpersonal relationship continues to be at the forefront of the teaching profession. Our findings suggest that positive interpersonal relationships can enhance teachers’ daily experiences and create a positive learning environment for the students.

KEYWORDS

Job Satisfaction, Online Education, Online Professional Development, Professionalism, Self-Efficacy, Teacher Student Relationship

INTRODUCTION

Teachers in the twenty-first century are faced with the new layers and new challenges of traditional ideas of professionalism. They often are required to take an increasing role in supporting the students and schools to fulfill what is expected of them. Teaching, like most other professions, has been influenced by the digital climate. While traditional classrooms are still relevant, increasingly more teacher education programs and K-12 schools offer online courses. Most online classes are designed to emulate traditional classroom’s student-teacher and student-student interactions; however, these classes present a different delivery and environmental challenges. Such a transition could create a paradigm shift and demands further investigation in existing conceptual models of professionalism in the education field. As the result, the current viewpoints and discussions around teacher professionalism might need to be revisited to make it more relevant to the teachers of the twenty-first century.

Teachers’ professional beliefs can strongly influence their teaching practices (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). In other words, teachers’ professionalism can indirectly influence students learning
and learning environment. Subsequently, there has been an international push to increase the status of the teaching profession by establishing a set of professional requirements (Okas, van der Schaaf, & Krull, 2014). Despite the existing concerns over students’ career readiness, with an emphasis on both academic and personal behaviors, teachers’ non-cognitive skills—including professional behaviors—have not gained the attention it deserves. Continuing research on topics related to teachers’ perceptions of professional behavior as it is viewed by them is crucial in enhancing our understanding of the field of teaching and learning.

This study aims to start a conversation on the topic of professionalism as it is viewed by teachers of a specific content area. Here we focused on a group of mathematics teachers who are enrolled in an online professional development at a midsize university in Southeast of the United States. The goal of this exploratory case study is to discover the participating teachers’ perceptions of professionalism and its relationship with self-efficacy (SE) and job-satisfaction while completing a prolonged online professional development. More specifically, we report the findings of a survey study that explores mathematics teachers’ views of professionalism, their perceived degree of self-efficacy, and job-satisfaction (JS) and their relationship with professionalism. Our analyses draw from a 25-item survey that investigated the following research questions:

- How do in-service mathematics teachers define the key elements of professionalism while completing an extended online professional development?
- How do self-efficacy and job-satisfaction predict in-service teachers’ perceptions of professionalism for these group of mathematics teachers?

This study is a part of a larger study examining the effect of professional development on secondary mathematics teachers’ instructional practices. Figure 2 shows the structural equation model developed based on our theoretical framework. Stemmed from existing literature, we hypothesized that teachers’ professionalism is influenced by self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), job satisfaction, and teacher-student relationship (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Specifically, we explored the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Teachers with a higher degree of self-efficacy will score higher on perception of professionalism construct.

**Hypothesis 2:** Teachers with a higher degree of job-satisfaction will score higher on perception of professionalism construct.

**Hypothesis 3:** Teacher-student relationship will moderate the effect of self-efficacy and job-satisfaction on teachers’ rating of professionalism.

**Why Professionalism Matters**

Since the conception of public education, teaching was not referred to as a profession rather an occupation (Shulman, 2001). During the last few decades, most industrialized countries have made an attempt to improve the image of teaching profession mainly by focusing on the traditional definition of professionalism which often includes essentials such as raising standards, accountability, and ethics (Okas, et al., 2014). For example, teacher education programs in Finland and United States have been centered around research-based teaching practices to enhance teachers’ professional image (Walsh & Sattes, 2016; Westbury, Hansen, Kansanen, & Björkqvist, 2005). In Finland on the other hand, there’s been an extensive struggle between the government views of professionalism versus the teacher union’s perception of professionalism for educators. While the government has been emphasizing on teacher accountability, the teacher union has been focusing on increasing not only the quality
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