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Teachers' agency and resilience in the crucible of authoritarian uncertainty. A case study of bottom-up partnerships in schools with international curriculum in Poland

Study background

Poland, along with other countries in East-Central Europe, has experienced a democratic deconsolidation and an authoritarian backlash since the 1990s, when it transitioned from communism to democracy (Bochsler et al., 2020). One of the main features of authoritarian governance is the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty, which creates a sense of insecurity and unpredictability among the citizens and the opposition (Schedler, 2013). However, this uncertainty also fosters the emergence of grassroots groups and partnerships that challenge the government's authoritarian policies and seek to defend democratic values and norms (Bochsler et al., 2020; Leek, 2022).

In the field of education, this uncertainty is especially evident among teachers, who face the dilemma of how to respond to the ruling party's attempts to use them to advance its ideological goals and to impose a top-down national curriculum that excludes teachers from the policy-making process (Sliwinski, 2020). In this context, some schools have adopted international programs, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Cambridge International (CI) curricula, which offer an alternative to the national curriculum and disrupt the influence and monopoly of the authoritarian government in curriculum development. These international programs, which are based on constructivist principles that involve teachers in curriculum planning and implementation, have also enabled schools to form grassroots partnerships with other schools and organizations, supporting teacher collaboration and innovation in matters related to the international programs. Leek (2022) refers to these schools as 'islands of educational resistance against an authoritarian government', as they provide a space for teachers to exercise their agency and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Research design

In order to examine functions of the IB programmes in Poland and the extent to which the unique aspects of international programmes contribute to bottom-up partnerships in school and out of schools, which they are implemented, there have been posed main research questions (1) How do partnerships among teachers in schools with international programs help teachers to navigate uncertainty in the context of authoritarian policymaking? (2) How do partnerships among teachers in schools with international programs promote teacher agency and resilience in the face of uncertainty? (3) What are the challenges and opportunities of forming and maintaining partnerships among teachers in schools with international programs in uncertain times?

Pre-liminary results

The study found that teacher partnerships in international program schools help navigate authoritarian policymaking in three ways: (1) providing community support, reducing isolation; (2)

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enabling resource/information sharing to adapt to policy changes; (3) creating spaces to discuss concerns and develop coping strategies.

These partnerships boost agency and resilience by fostering professional ownership. Participants reported greater confidence in pursuing goals despite restrictive policies and more innovation in teaching methods.

Challenges include balancing national/international curricula and negotiating ambiguous "boundaries" between them. However, benefits include increased autonomy, curriculum innovation aligned with values, and expanded professional networks that attract new educators.

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