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Micropolitics of School and EFL Teachers' Professional Interests: The Case of Schools for Gifted Students in Iran

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the role of the micropolitics of schools for gifted students in the EFL teachers' professional interests in the workplace. Results of interviews revealed that to establish their professional interests, teachers involved in conflict and rivalry as well as collaboration and coalition. Furthermore, teachers' micropolitical actions were interrelated with their efficacy beliefs. Self-interests such as public recognition and high visibility were sought as they provided a positive feedback on teachers' professional behavior and substantiated their efficacy. Material interests such as the use of the smart boards, the Internet, and extra resources were further means through which they could present their informed and efficacious character to others. Organizational interests also confirmed teachers' efficacy since only effective teachers were recruited in schools for gifted students. Teachers' social interests achieved through developing affinity and rapport with others, particularly the principals, were the prerequisite for the establishment of all other professional interests. The findings were discussed with reference to the importance of fostering micropolitical literacy and the effect of information on school micropolitics on teachers' ability to develop appropriate coping strategies.

Key words: Micropolitics; Professional interests; Teacher efficacy; Power; School structure

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1. Introduction

Any conceptualization of school as an organization encompasses complex relationships between its individual members. Like any organization, it is also characterized by its own challenges, conflicts, and power relationships. Therefore, it is inherently political in nature i.e. it provides a platform for the expression of influence, control, and interest by its members (Ball, 2012). Accordingly, teachers are confronted with micropolitical realities in this organization which takes as its central concern the power structures (Blasé, 1991) as well as individuals' interpretations of these political processes and their choices, values, interests, and motives (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Kelchtermans (1996) relates the concept to the valued working conditions which teachers consider necessary or desirable to perform their professional tasks properly and effectively. In the cases where their desired working conditions are not achieved, teachers engage in micropolitical actions to establish, safeguard, or restore their professional interests.

As a result, teachers' perception of what they consider valued working conditions is inevitably tied to and shaped by the wider socio-political context in which they find themselves. School structure and the power relationships inside it can encourage teachers' micropolitical actions in different ways. Characteristics such as school population composition, facilities, workload, parent involvement, helpfulness of school staff, students' readiness to learn, and the quality of interpersonal relations constitute important factors of teachers' working environment. Yet, little is known about the role of these factors in teachers' micropolitical literacy or the ability to appreciate the issues of power and interest in schools (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

Developing micropolitical literacy takes place as a result of teachers' interaction with the specifications of their school environment and is determined by the characteristics of their organizational milieu. Yet, little empirical research has been done on micropolitical realities of schools in different contexts. Moreover, the existing body of research on school micropolitics presents a fragmented picture of the micropolitical environment of the school context. Furthermore, it mainly considers the beginning teachers irrespective of the subject matter they teach. We believe that not only the perception of other teachers is worth investigating, but

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also that studies on micropolitical aspects of the schools should take into account the peculiarities of teachers' subject area. The way a math teacher perceives the micropolitical realities of her school environment may be different from the way an English teacher does. Therefore, this study investigates how EFL teachers perceive the micropolitical realities of the schools for gifted students in Iran.

In Iran, to provide high quality education, schools for gifted students are developed with a mission to further nurture the talents of the exceptionally gifted students. Admission into these schools is selective and based on a comprehensive nationwide entrance examination procedure. Therefore, the structure of schools is different from that of public schools with respect to teacher recruitment, collegial relationships, material support, student evaluation, parental involvement and expectations, students' socioeconomic background, and teachers' workload. First, students are supposed to be talented ones who pose incredible challenges to the EFL teachers with respect to the amount of preparation and the level of proficiency. Second, students have to attend periodical tests and olympiads for which teachers are expected to prepare them. Third, many students have already studied English in private institutes and hence, the students in a class are not homogenous with respect to English proficiency.

Apart from the challenges posed by students, EFL teachers working in school for gifted students often have to meet the high demand of principals and parents who are usually at a high socio-economic level and scrutinize teachers' actions and behaviors. In addition, teachers' work in these schools extend beyond the routine class tasks and include activities such as taking part in the competitions and festivals, attending regular meetings with parents in the afternoons, and teaching extracurricular contents and textbooks. In spite of all these demands and expectations, teacher recruitment in these schools is commonly based on teacher resume and there is often a lot of competition for being selected in these schools. Moreover, EFL teachers are facing additional dilemmas given that the course books have recently undergone a reform based on CLT approach while there is still a tendency for teaching based on GTM and Audio-lingual method in the community and among the parents. Considering all these conditions, this study

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aims to present a socio-politically informed analysis of the structure of schools for gifted students and its role in EFL teachers' professional interests in Iran.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Micropolitics refer to the strategies and tactics employed by individuals in an organization to influence others and pursue their interests (Kelchtermans, 1993). As Achinstein (2006) proposed, "Micropolitics, as highlighted in the research, refers to the political negotiations within the day-to-day life of schools-the intra-organizational processes" (p.149). In the same line, Hoyle (1986) described the organizational structure of schools as having 4 domains: bargaining strategies, individual or group interests, interest groups/ sets, and power. He deemed micropolitical knowledge necessary in order to successfully navigate school policies.

Studies on the micropolitics of school encompass many aspects of power dynamics including the relationship among school principalship, teachers, parents, and school's discipline policy. Jokikokko, Uitto, Deketelaere, and Estola (2017), for example, addressed the question of how emotions and micropolitics appeared in a beginning teacher's work and what strategies she employed to deal with emotionally intense situations. They found that their case, Vuokko, experienced joy in relation to the subject, the unpredictable nature of the work, and the challenging students. However, she felt professionally alone and received little support from her colleagues and administrator. She also perceived the colleagues annoying when they downplayed her and questioned her professionalism. Her anecdotes (proper way of touching students, music teacher being responsible for organizing school festivals and arranging school festival by herself) illuminated aspects of micropolitical rules and the inequalities present at school. However, she followed her own moral and ideological stance and could take her place in the community. The authors concluded that teachers have different views and values at school and they use formal and informal power to influence and protect their goals. Their study indicated that beginning teachers are able to read the micropolitical context of their school and find a balance between school micropolitics and their own ideologies and ideals.

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Conway and Rawlings (2015) examined beginning music teachers' understanding and self-perceptions of micropolitical literacy. Results from a qualitative interview design revealed that micropolitics helped teachers to effectively manage classroom and take control of disruptive students. It also affected teachers' ability to navigate the hierarchical structures and secure schedule time and curricular resources for music class. As another facet of micropolitics, instability of the teachers' positions prohibited them from negotiating and changing things within their school structure. Micropolitics were also in play in silencing of teachers by other colleagues. Isolation of teachers was another micropolitical issue emerged from the data that included both physical isolation (lack of personal meetings and communication among colleagues) and emotional one.

The micropolitical power of experienced teachers within the school system was identified by Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2015). They argued that experienced teachers had various social and organizational capital including respect from principals and other teachers, understanding of school organizational processes, and relationships within the school community. Therefore, they could exercise greater influence on school decisions including the assignment process, accessing to more desirable assignments in schools, altering class compositions, and excluding difficult as well as Black and low-income students from their own classes. The repercussion of such a process was that disadvantaged students lost out and experienced teachers were not assigned to students who needed them most, a goal inconsistent with educational equity. Their study also highlighted another facet of micropolitical dynamics and educational inequalities at schools.

Based on a qualitative multi-case study conducted in the context of an induction program, Curry, Jaxon, Russell, Callahan, and Bicais (2008) investigated how beginning teachers collaboratively made sense of and responded to the micropolitical realities of their school environment. Results showed that cultural-ideological interests were the most salient category of teachers' professional interests. Additionally, contrary to other studies (e.g. Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Blasé, 1985), their cases tended to actively pursue alternative/ transformational visions of teaching and schooling. Departing from a survivalist orientation, they

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adopted a critical ideological stance when faced with administrators' disagreement, collegial criticisms, and other challenges.

Accordingly, as the studies reported above show, when teachers feel powerless or politically ineffective to make their valued workplace conditions, vulnerability comes out as a result. Kelchtermans (1996) defines it as the ''feeling that one's professional identity and moral integrity, as part of being a proper teacher, are questioned and that valued workplace conditions are thereby threatened or lost'' (p. 319). He identified three sources of vulnerability in teachers' professional life. At the classroom level, they experienced vulnerability due to limits in their professional knowledge and skills to impact the struggling students. At the school level, the expectations, demands, and behavior of school principals, gossip and envy from colleagues, and criticism and unfair judgment from parents constituted the second source of vulnerability. Finally, educational policy decisions by the local educational administrators such as involving teachers in the local community activities, school merger, job insecurity, and forced changes in grades comprised the third potential source at the broader macro level.

Blasé (1988) also described that school principals and parents were significant sources of vulnerability. Principals influenced teachers through making decisions regarding their employment, retention, appointments, promotion, evaluation, punishment, recognition, and praise as well as providing support in conflict with students and parents. Parents were found to be demanding in that they required teachers to be enthusiastic and accountable and to act as role models who taught pupils conventional values. Additionally, they demanded teachers to change students' grades, reduce homework, and mete out unreasonable punishments.

To cope with vulnerability, teachers need to involve themselves in micropolitical actions (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Blasé (1988) identified six major political strategies teachers employed when confronted with sources of vulnerability, i.e. acquiescence, conformity, diplomacy, passive-aggressiveness, ingratiation, and confrontation. Acquiescence is overt behavioral compliance and congruence to the expectations and demands of others. Conformity is also a reactive tactic which alludes to compromises teachers make in order to survive. The point of contrast with acquiescence is that conformity is associated with

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greater discretion in teachers and the absence of intense negative emotions. Ingratiation refers to a strategy which is concerned with reciprocation (exchange of favors) and the influence of others. Strictly speaking, individuals apply flatterer to others to protect themselves and to achieve their goals.

Diplomacy points to a political strategy that reflects a balanced concern with both protection and influence. It mainly describes tactics of tactfulness, politeness, friendliness, positiveness, and empathy for others. Passive-aggressiveness characterizes a political strategy in which the actions of others are discredited by means of indirect, covert, and devious tools such as gossiping. Confrontation is concerned with challenging the actions of others when ones' deep-seated personal or professional values and ethics are violated.

As the review above shows, the study of school micropolitics includes power dynamics among school personnel, parents, principals, teachers, colleagues, and other stakeholders (Malen & Cochran, 2008). Apart from the study of Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2015), very few studies have explored the experienced teachers' perceptions of micropolitical dynamics of school structure and none the perceptions of EFL teachers. This study seeks to address the gap by analyzing the micropolitical understanding of EFL teachers in the context of schools for gifted students in Iran and the way they tackle the diverse sources of vulnerability. In particular, the study addresses the following research question:

What is the role of the micropolitics of schools for gifted students in EFL teachers' professional interests?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The data of this study are based on interviews with 22 EFL teachers teaching English to students of secondary and tertiary levels (ages 13-18) in South Khorasan province in Iran. The study utilized purposeful sampling to select teachers who were teaching English in schools for gifted students and thus had rich information about the structure of the schools. The participants were mainly males (69.5%, N=16) and all but one were M.A holders or PhD. candidates (one participant had a BA in TEFL). Their average age was 38 (range 30-48) and the mean number of

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years they have been in the teaching profession was 17 with a range from 6 to 26. All teachers were teaching in schools for gifted students and some were concurrently teaching in other public schools at the time of study.

3.2. Instrument

3.2.1. Interview

The grounded theory approach informed the process of data collection and coding in this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The aim was to provide a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation and to identify the relationship among the concepts related to the phenomenon with a sufficient level of saturability (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, 2 rounds of interviews were conducted each lasting from 20 to 60 minutes. The interview protocol was mainly adapted from methodological procedures in other studies on school micropolitics (e.g. Conway & Rawlings, 2015).The entire protocol comprised 40 questions on different aspects of teachers' emotional relationship with their students, colleagues, school principals, and parents in addition to semi-structured and unstructured questions used to further investigate the issue under discussion. Respondents were required to reflect on their emotional experiences with each group of individuals in the work place and to report on critical "emotional incidents" (Erb, 2002) or "significant emotional episodes" (Hargreaves, 2000) which were emotionally salient enough to be recalled. In this article, only those questions related to micropolitical structure of the schools for gifted students are presented. A list of interview questions is provided in Appendix A.

3.3. Analytical framework

The data obtained from 2 rounds of interviews were transcribed and coded line by line and by hand given the limitations of computer software for grounded theory research (Glaser, 1998). The obtained data from the first round of interviews were analyzed using the categories of professional interests developed by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002). Subsequent interviews were conducted to probe more details in terms of the identified categories, clarify inconsistencies and ambiguities, and

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establish saturability of analysis. The categories of professional interests include self-interests, material interests, organizational interests, cultural-ideological interests, and social professional interests.

When teachers' identity, professional self-esteem, and task perception are threatened, self- interests emerge. They thus have to do with self-affirmation, dealing with vulnerability, and achieving visibility in teachers' job. Material interests concern the availability of teaching materials, funds, specific infrastructure, and structural time facilities. Organizational interests incorporate procedures, roles, positions, or formal tasks in the school. Cultural-ideological interests deal with norms and values being acknowledged by members of school organization which define the culture of school and ideals about good teaching. Finally, social-professional interests concern the quality of interpersonal relationships in and around the school.

Several re-readings were done to ensure that all pieces of data were incorporated into analysis. Finally, segments of verbatim quotes were selected to illustrate the points. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, a second researcher independently coded a set of 8 interviews using the professional interest categories. The double-coding process resulted in 90.2% agreement on the interview data analysis (12 disagreements from 122 coding options). The disagreements were then discussed and the discrepancies were resolved.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Self-interests

Teachers' self-interests which instigated their micropolitical actions were those which threatened their professional identity, self-esteem, and task perception (teachers' definition of their job). Similar to what Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) presented, the sources of teachers' self-interests are divided into seeking self-affirmation, coping with vulnerability, and visibility in their job.

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4.1.1. Self-affirmation

The teachers in this study worked in schools which were professionally demanding and competitive. The multiple functions expected from teachers caused them excessive burden and accountability. Apart from their primary role as teachers, they reported a plethora of school-related activities such as attending constant meetings with parents in the afternoons, taking part in festivals and competitions (such as the best models of teaching), planning exhibitions (e.g. Fajr exhibitions), searching for extracurricular content and materials, arranging for makeup sessions to prepare students for olympiads, and any other activities which made schools for gifted students have a voice among other schools. This multi-functionality, teachers believed, needed to be recognized by students, parents, and school principals. However, principals were reported to rarely provide any expression of appreciation and recognition:

Principals only see the weaknesses. We haven't had even one case that they say parents have come and thanked us. …in one case, I was leaving the office and I heard with my own ears that the father of one of the students was complimenting me… I was all waiting to be told about that, but I wasn't (teacher 11, interview 2).

The significance of this acknowledgment is evident given that teachers receive a positive evaluation of their professional behavior. It means that *the teacher is doing his work well* (teacher 3, interview1). It is, therefore, a source of positive self-esteem (Gold, 1996) and teacher efficacy. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) also argued that the experience of professional success inside and outside the classroom contributed to public recognition and improved teachers' professional self-confidence. Kelchtermans (1996) called teachers' quest for social recognition politics of identity, that is developing a socially recognized identity as a proper teacher.

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4.1.2. Coping with vulnerability

Teachers perceived vulnerability as a result of experiencing potential threats to their efficacy including the unpredictable nature of classroom events coupled with students' high talents and demands. To keep their efficacy high, teachers delineated appropriate rules of conduct in the first encounters with students:

I've told them that while teaching, they are not allowed to turn back, talk to their friends or ask questions… if they don't bring homework, they'll be given a minus point. We also have minus points for disciplinary issues and .25 is subtracted from their scores for each minus point (teacher 11, interview1).

In conjunction with the determination of clearly stated rules, there are some rules which are only negotiated through teacher's demeanor. In particular, teachers showed greater sensitivity to the students' disorderly behaviors in the beginning sessions: *I think, the first few sessions are very important. I usually inspect students very closely and try to tackle every behavior which smells fishy and mischievous* (teacher 1, interview 1).

In addition to specifying the explicit and implicit rules of etiquettes, teachers make a plan for every session of the class not only based on curriculum content, but also according to what has occurred during the previous sessions concerning students' behavior:

I have a plan for every session and I specify a goal for myself. This is not necessarily written, but I may have it in my mind ... If in the previous session I have left the class angrily or a class has made me sad, I plan for it (teacher 4, interview2).

Part of teachers' planning involves preparation for students' probable questions which may be beyond teachers' immediate knowledge. To cope with this source of threat, teachers attempted to get enough preparation before the class. A final source

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of vulnerability stems from the criticisms of and conflicts with the stakeholders external to classroom including parents, principals, and colleagues. Since the relationships with these parties are included in the social-professional section of our analytical framework, the discussion will be presented there.

Our results are in line with Kelchtermans and Ballet's (2002) who reported that their subjects felt vulnerable as a result of experiencing shortcomings and limits in their competence and external criticism from parents. Classroom management issues, being silenced by more experienced teachers, and emotional and professional isolation were also reported as beginning teachers' challenges by Conway and Rawling (2015).

4.1.3. Coping with visibility

Visibility in this context is closely related to teachers' efficacy and vulnerability. Teachers' perception of their efficacy affects the way they present themselves to others and on the other hand, people's judgment about their actions and the feedback they receive from other people influences their efficacy beliefs. The most important aspects of visibility are test outcomes (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) and students' acceptance rate at universities. Students' performance on exams is the most important criterion based on which teacher efficacy is judged. Consequently, teachers embark on political actions in situations where their efficacy and social recognition are threatened due to students' poor performance.

As many students in schools for gifted students seek admission to reputable universities, their subject-specific courses such as biology and math gain more coefficients in entrance exam than the general courses such as English. As such, some students tend to allocate their time to special courses and disregard studying for general ones. One of the participants reported a student that, although studious, handed over a completely blank paper and failed his English test. The teacher summoned his father and asked for his supervision and assistance and the strategy paid off. Whereas the strategy the teacher employed was to enhance his visibility with respect to the student's test results and the care he provided, it was also a means to prevent his efficacy from declining since:

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If a student is warned but he/ she doesn't pay attention, or his father is called for, but he is still headless, I'll get angry, but then I'll tell myself I've done my duty. I'm not responsible to this student any more (teacher 13, interview1).

The other aspect of visibility concerned keeping an emotionally neutral tone and maintaining the required distance with students. That is, teachers who engage too emotionally with students are evaluated negatively by others. In one case, a teacher described her student giving her a writing assignment from her class in an English institute to correct. The teacher said she promised to give it back to the student by the second break, but she forgot to. In the last break, the student came to the staff room to pick her paper up and she was notified that she had to wait a little more for the teacher to comment on it. The teacher maintained that the student was annoyed and showed her complaint with a disrespectful tone. The colleagues and the principal were reported to criticize the permissiveness of the teacher and her lack of reaction to the student. The teacher having been in tears by their comments stated that:

You expect me to panic students. You know how much they love me and how well they study my lesson. I'm contented with my way. If you are not, I'll leave this school (teacher 19, interview2).

This internalization of the teacher's role as keeping distance with students and maintaining the logical authority over them led most teachers to down-regulate their positive emotions on several grounds. First, since positive emotionality usually accompanies noise and disorder, revealing excessive positive emotions may jeopardize teacher's role as the manager of the class and provoke others' negative evaluation of them. Second, it may be interpreted as a permit to many of students' unexpected and inappropriate behaviors making the achievement of specified educational goals far from accessible. Therefore, teachers said they evaluated the importance and incorporation of emotions in class in line with the contribution they had to the teaching process.

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My syllabus and the framework I've outlined for myself is always prioritized to emotions. When I see too much happiness and letting students express it takes the class too far and makes me lag behind my program, I stop it (teacher 17, interview1).

Keeping the distance with the students and maintaining authority over them was also a concern of Chinese teachers (Gao, 2008). They maintained that the policy changes complicated by emerging consumer awareness among parents and students undercut teachers' traditional authority and caused them great unease. In a similar vein, authority has been viewed as a visible part of teachers' job (Kelchtermans, 1993) and teachers believed that publically manifesting their authority and management skills contributed to the positive evaluation as proper teachers by significant others (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

In sum, self-interest categories (self-affirmation, vulnerability, and visibility issues) can be amalgamated under the general term efficacy-interests because they emerge when teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are threatened in one way or another. One source of such threat is lack of recognition and appreciation by significant others since it gives the teachers the impression that they are not competent teachers. A second threatening source to efficacy comes from the insecure nature of classroom events and students' character which may seem unmanageable to the teachers. Finally, social expectations and norms which are inconsistent to the teachers' task perception are also a threat to teachers' efficacy.

4.2. Material interests

One of the problems mentioned by teachers in this study was the paucity of time for English in the timetable. While time allocation for every course is a matter of policy makers' decision nationwide and thus out of teachers' control, the very expectations of the stakeholders including principals, parents, and students put further pressures on teachers. Not only were they supposed to cover the curriculum content in due time, but they were also demanded to prepare students for entrance exam and periodic olympiads. The significance of time availability lies in the fact

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that it is directly related to teacher visibility and efficacy since their efficacy is judged in terms of passing rate and students' performance on tests. Time availability is a pre-requisite for the use of other materials as well. While schools for gifted students are commonly equipped with smart boards, computer sites, and other provisions, time insufficiency limits their utility and usefulness. One typical problem in this regard was the use of course book CD in a practical way:

Because we don't make time to listen to CD, I ask students to listen to it at home. But one of our big problems is that they don't ... When they don't have anything to write, they suppose they don't have anything special for tomorrow. Every session, I have to remind them that their homework is their CD (teacher 3, interview1).

The paucity of time allocated to the music course in the schedule and the scarcity of resources and materials were also considered as sources of vulnerability by beginning music teachers in Conway and Rawlings' (2015) study. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) stressed the importance of material resources as a micropolitical agenda for self-presentation and contended that "Teaching materials always carry with them as a symbolical load a normative idea about good teaching and, as such, are meaningful artifacts that either converge or conflict with the dominant school culture" (p.113).

4.3. Organizational interests

Organizational interests contain procedures, roles, positions, and tasks in the whole education system since formal matters are more often prescribed by the ministry of education and delivered to schools across the country. In particular, teacher recruitment for these schools was a point of concern for most teachers. Unlike public schools for which teachers are determined by the local education office and based on their teaching experience (the more experienced teachers are sent to urban schools and the novices to rural and suburban schools), in schools for gifted students principals are sanctioned to choose their own staff. The selection is usually based on teachers' resume and from among those who are commonly

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known as effective teachers in the area. As such, experience and age are less than a concern for selection in schools for gifted students. Teachers conceive of this system of recruitment as discriminatory and some principals were judged as unfair in teacher selection.

The teacher being sent to SAMPAD school was neither higher than me with respect to teaching experience nor degree … It devastated me … It came out to me as a complete failure and I took that year off. I couldn't put up with this injustice any more (teacher 19, interview 2).

Similarly, the lack of a precise system of teacher evaluation and accordingly an appropriate system of reward or reprimand constituted a further source of despair and demotivation to teachers.

One source of my sadness comes from the officials in the education system … The teacher who works and the teacher who doesn't are all viewed the same (teacher 5, interview 1).

This is especially the case in the schools for gifted students, given that in spite of the heavy burden and accountability, they are granted no more advantages, payments, or perks in comparison to teachers in typical schools.

Another issue that evoked teachers' micropolitical actions was that scores were losing their constructive force in the education system and that the teachers were forced to pass students since on the one hand, their evaluation and next year's recruitment were done based on their passing rate and on the other hand, the system allowed students to enter a higher grade even if they failed a course and did not achieve the passing score. Therefore, the teachers faced difficulty in involving unmotivated and underachieving students.

Teachers' organizational interests were also to attest to their efficacy since being recruited in these schools and having principals' support in this regard suggested that the teacher was an effective one. Whereas the teachers in our study had already a position as a tenured teacher and thus felt secure about their status,

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the beginning teachers in Conway and Rawlings' (2015) study were concerned about the instability of their contracts and the chances of being employed the following years. The shifts in educational policies and teacher employment practices based on contracts were also sources of insecurity and vulnerability for Chinese teachers in Gao's (2008) study. Hence, the nature of their organizational interests differs from our participants'.

4.4. Cultural-ideological interests

The culture of schools for gifted students is characterized by high levels of competition and demand. First, admission into these schools both as a teacher and as a student entails a high degree of competence and knowledge. Second, the professional life in these schools includes more than common school affairs. Teachers are expected to cope with the main teaching activities in conjunction with additional test books, workbooks, testing classes, festivals, and competitions. In this culture of rivalry and demand, teachers should strive hard to keep their passing rate and class average score high.

Another aspect of the culture in schools for gifted students is the high degree of collegiality and collaboration among colleagues in order to improve students' learning. Sharing knowledge and information, team working on different projects, and exchanging experience and materials are instances of such cooperation. One of the teachers who was also the head teacher in the province said:

We are lucky in this regard because I know other schools are not this way. I've observed many schools and I've seen that the colleagues often snitch on each other… they often make bonds based on their common interests. Yet, most of them do not care about students' problems (teacher 10, interview 2).

A final aspect of culture in schools for gifted students is parents' interaction with school stakeholders and involvement in school affairs. The discussion of this cultural aspect of school life is presented in the next part.

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4.5. Social-professional interests

More than anything else, teachers expressed concerns about the quality of interpersonal relationships in schools for gifted students. The structure of schools entails teachers to work in close proximity with colleagues, principals, and parents. That is, the success of the teachers is subject to and evaluated based on the relationship they make with others. They need to make close bonds with principals to have their positive end-of-the-year evaluation and next year's recruitment as well as their support in front of the demanding parents and unruly students. For example, one of the teachers mentioned using principal's information about students to resolve their problems. He referred to his principal as an encyclopedia in that:

He knows all students, their parents, relatives, problems, etc. … Whenever I run into a problem with a student, I ask his consultation. In a wink and without looking at any files, he passes all information about the student to me. When everything is made clear, I can see where the problem is (teacher 14, interview 2).

In addition, principals also provided extra support to the teachers and avoided interfering in their work: *There is more a trusting relationship than intervention* (teacher 6, interview 2). The reason was attributed to principals' believing in teachers' qualifications and competence. Furthermore, if principals' lack of support leads the teachers to leave the school, it may mean a great loss to the school as: *there may be no better choice in the city* (teacher 5, interview 2). Therefore, there is a mutual interest for both teachers and principals to work closely to each other.

Conflicts, however, arose as a result of principals' enforcing strict rules. In these cases, teachers predominantly sought to make justifications and come to a compromise with the principals. As an example, a teacher reported that students in grade 4 of high school take part in entrance exam of university after finishing this grade. The regular school schedule delivered through circulars is the end of Ordibehesht (May), but normally students in this grade finish the classes before

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Farvardin (April) to have time for review and further personal work. He said that the principal in his school insisted on extending the classes after Farvardin even though the books had been finished. He stated that:

I openly discussed the problem with the principal. I told him not to look at the circulars, look at what is to the benefit of the students… I have finished my book, we have had extra tests for every lesson. So, why do we put the screws on students to come to school? Let students decide for themselves. Those who care about their lesson, will study it even if they are at home. Those who don't, won't study even if we twist their arm (teacher 12, interview 2).

A mutual relationship between principals and teachers is rarely reported in the literature. Primarily, their relationship is reported to be characterized by power and influence. For instance, principals in Gao's (2008) research put extra demands on teachers and pressurized them to work without complaining. Yet in this study, teachers developed working relationships with principals to guarantee the achievement of their professional interests and enhance their efficacy. Their positive relationships with the principals could protect them from sources of threats posed by students and parents and foster social recognition (self-interests). It also created opportunities for future recruitment and support (organizational interests). Results of other studies have also confirmed that principals' leadership has a direct effect on teachers' sense of efficacy. Principals can affect teachers' efficacy positively through creating a common sense of purpose, keeping student disorder to a minimum, providing teachers with resources, preventing from disruptive factors, and allowing for teachers' flexibility over classroom affairs (Hipp & Bredeson, 1995; Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991).

The relationship among colleagues teaching the same subject was also reported to be based on mutual support and collegial cooperation. Several cases were reported about the intimate relationships between English colleagues which extended to family and friendship relationships. One of the teachers maintained:

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They call it lesson study today. We've been doing it for 4 or 5 years without knowing its name. We make our joint PPT slides, lesson plans, and flash cards ... We take part in festivals and competitions together. Before this, we weren't so close. Because of our work we got so intimate (teacher, 15, interview 2).

Collaboration and positive collegial relations with colleagues may provide opportunities for exchanging knowledge and experience (social-professional interests) and may allow accessibility to teaching resources and materials (material interests). It hence increases teachers' efficacy. Previous research, however, mainly concur with the fact that teachers in many cultural contexts are emotionally isolated from their colleagues and that real communication among colleagues, group-level commitment, and concerted action to pursue goals are very rare, if not nonexistent (Blasé 1988; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). The reason has been attributed to teachers' conservative orientation towards school involvement and emotional misunderstanding caused by lack of trust, closeness, and difference in identity and emotional geographies (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). Also perfectionism -not divulging the problems teachers encounter in the fear that revealing it may be a sign of inadequacy and deficiency-caused teachers to remain professionally apart (Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989).

Parents, on the contrary, were found to be demanding and intrusive due to the high social, educational, and economic background. They attended regular meetings with teachers and scrutinized teachers in every aspect. *Parents are highly educated and they conceive of themselves as jack of all trades. They come and comment on everything … I directly tell them that this is not the area of their expertise, so they shouldn't intervene* (teacher 4, interview 2).One of the teachers reported that the change in the course book based on CLT approach and the subsequent change in his method of teaching aroused parents' criticisms. He said parents questioned him concerning the decrease in students' written homework, grammar explanation, translation, and spelling tests. The teacher explained that he strived to inform them of the changes. He also held a meeting with parents at the very beginning of the following years to discuss the issue.

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Consequently, the relationship between parents and teachers was marked by power, status, and influence. Yet, contrary to other studies (e.g. Walker & MacLure, 1999; Bernhard & Freire, 1999), in our study, parents were reported to be in control, dominated the interaction, and imposed their perspective on teachers. It was attributed to parents' high socioeconomic and educational standing. Nonetheless, this finding is in contrast to Lasky's claim (2000) that teachers are socialized into the culture of teaching with the belief that their professional status as experts in the field and their higher level of knowledge provided them with authority and power. Our results showed that one has to consider the role of socioeconomic status of parents and school structure in the relationship between teachers and parents. In Griffith's study (1998) too, parents' socioeconomic status and educational expectations for children were related to parent participation.

Apart from the domineering role of parents in interaction with teachers, schools for gifted students were typified by high levels of parent involvement which teachers took advantage of to improve students' performance and further their visibility. Parents' involvement into school has been also shown to positively affect students' motivation, behavior, and test scores in other studies (Epstein, 1991; Henderson, 1988; Johnson & Walker, 1991).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how micropolitics of schools for gifted students affected EFL teachers' professional interests in the workplace. Results of interviews with teachers indicated that to obtain their valued working conditions, teachers involved in not only conflict and rivalry, but also collaboration and coalition. They strived to build positive and working relationships with principals and colleagues so as to receive their support and cooperation and guarantee their future recruitment. Instances of conflict also included contention with the demanding and intrusive parents and disorderly students. These results are in line with Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) and Blasé (1991) as they also corroborated that power has two sides. One side includes influence, tension, and struggle, and the other comprises coalition and partnership. Lasky (2005) also

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stated that vulnerability as a fluid state of being can incorporate the experience of openness, trust, and collaboration as well as powerlessness, betrayal, or defenselessness.

In addition, it was indicated that teachers' professional interests are interrelated with their efficacy beliefs. Kelchtermans (1993) also talked of the relationship between micropolitical literacy and teachers' self-esteem which he defined in terms of teachers' evaluation of themselves as a teacher. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) also viewed teachers' self-esteem and task perception highly relevant to their ability to engage in micropolitical action. They argued that self-interests emerge when teachers' identity, self-esteem, or task perceptions are threatened by the professional context and self-interests are at stake in any micropolitical action. Therefore, it can be concluded that the underlying reason for many micropolitical actions is that teachers' self-esteem or identity is undermined. These terms (self-esteem, identity, and self-image) are also closely related to teacher efficacy. Our data indicated that teachers' efficacy beliefs and professional interests are interwoven in complex ways and there seems to be a bilateral relationship between the two. However, more research is needed to further investigate the issue. Moreover, our study was based on the premise that the teachers in different subject areas perceive the micropolitical realities of their school setting in different ways. Nevertheless, further research is required to clarify the point.

Moreover, three sources of vulnerability were identified in our study. At the classroom level, teachers experienced vulnerability due to the unpredictable nature of classroom events and students' behaviors. To evade vulnerability at this level, teachers exercised order, discipline, and authority over the pupils since they felt that their professional competence was judged by their disciplinary efficacy (Kelchtermans, 1996). Additionally, they were expected to keep an emotionally neutral tone with the students and to act as role models. To tackle this source of vulnerability, teachers attempted to down-regulate their emotions and direct their time and energy to the curriculum delivery. At school level, they felt vulnerable due to the high demands and criticisms of other stakeholders and the multiple functions expected of them. At the macro-organizational level, vulnerability arose as a result of teacher recruitment policy in these schools. To cope with

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vulnerability at these levels, teachers made close ties with principals, parents, and colleagues and solicited their assistance and cooperation in the cases of conflict.

The results of this study points to the importance of fostering micropolitical literacy in teachers and its effect on their ability to develop appropriate coping mechanisms. Our data provided instances of teachers' making explicit references to the significance of developing such literacy early in the educational year. They recommended that the details of the micropolitical realities of the schools can be given to the teachers and their attention can be directed to the aspects of the organizational realities of their context. As such, school principals, mentors, and teacher educators can integrate micropolitical literacy into their agenda through ongoing inquiry groups and discussion forums within which the organizational structures and professional cultures of the schools are negotiated and co-constructed. That being so, it provides a means of mitigating sources of vulnerability and increasing teachers' efficacy.

Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) and Blasé and Blasé (1997) also stressed the integration of such literacy into teacher development, initial training, and induction programs. Likewise, Zembylas (2007) argued that any conceptualization of pedagogical content knowledge should include teachers' emotional understanding of themselves, others, and the wider social and political contexts in which teaching and learning occurs. Curry, Jaxon, Russell, Callahan, and Bicais (2008) also maintained that micropolitical literacy is necessary if school reform and transformative and critical visions of education are to be conducted effectively.

Our study indicated how EFL teachers engage in micropolitical actions to establish their professional interests. The results of the study can thus be illuminating for other teachers particularly the novices in how to deal with the micropolitical issues of their environment. It also contributes to the literature on school micropolitics as it takes into account the many aspects of micropolitical dynamics of the schools whereas the existing studies only provide a fragmented and partial landscape of school micropolitics. Nonetheless, the study is limited in generalizability given the situated and contextual nature of research data and the peculiarities of the research setting. In addition, the research is based on only interview data with teachers. More in-depth analysis can be performed by

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collecting data through other methods including teacher observation, experience sampling method, and journal writing.

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Appendix

Interview questions used to investigate the micropolitical realities of the schools for gifted students and teachers' professional interests.

1. Talk about your school structure (facilities, parents, peer teachers, school staff, administration, etc.)
2. Discuss how you feel about school principal, his/ her relationship, decisions, characteristics, etc.
3. Discuss your relationship with other teachers at school, the amount of their cooperation, the topics of discussions, etc.
4. Explain your relationship with parents, the frequency and amount of interaction, their involvement in school affairs, the topics of your discussions, etc.
5. Explain your relationship with students, their characteristics, expectations, demands, etc.
6. Explain the critical emotional incidents you had with students, parents, principals, and colleagues.

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