

## Professional Development of Teacher Educators: Reflections on the Current Situation and Exploration of Future Strategies

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### Abstract

Teacher educators are tutors who lead and promote the professional development of teachers and teachers-to-be. As such, the level of professional development of these educators themselves directly influences both the subsequent quality of teachers at all levels, and the level of a country's education as a whole. This paper analyses the current situation of the professional development of Chinese teacher educators from four perspectives. The paper also analyses the current gaps in their professional development, and proposes strategies for the purpose of promoting educators' progression.

**Key words:** Teacher educator; Professional development; Current situation; Strategy

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### INTRODUCTION

Promoting the professional development of teachers and improving their teaching quality is a vital aspect of the development of teacher education. While there have been many studies conducted by Chinese researchers on teachers' professional development, the same attention has not been paid to "the teacher of teachers", i.e., teacher educators. Simply speaking, teacher educators are professionals who specialise in the work of teacher

education and promote the professional development of teachers-to-be. To date, the studies undertaken by Chinese scholars on teacher educators mostly focus on analysing the professional standards of teacher educators in foreign countries (Zheng, 2013; Wang, 2013). These studies also tend to focus on educators' own development patterns, i.e., self-studies (Zheng, 2011; Liu, 2009). However, no in-depth research has been conducted on the current situation, challenges/gaps and other issues related to specifically Chinese teacher educators' professional development. China has always exerted itself to improve the quality of its teaching body; given that the professional development level of teacher educators directly influences both the quality of teachers at all levels and the level of the education as a whole, more efforts should be made to study the professional development of teacher educators. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1 Theoretical Background

The Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) defines teacher educators as "educators who provide formal instruction or conduct research and development for educating prospective and practicing teachers", they provide the professional education component of preservice programs and the staff development component of inservice programs, including faculty in higher education who provide course work and conduct research as described by NCATE as professional studies, including clinical experiences; personnel in schools who provide instruction or supervision of clinical experiences of prospective teachers; personnel in schools who administer or conduct instructional activities designed to provide advanced professional study for teachers; personnel from other agencies who design, implement,

and evaluate professional study for teachers (Association of Teacher Educators). The Dutch Association for Teacher Educators (VELON) defines teacher educators as someone who works within higher vocational education or university (institute-based educator), or in a professional development school (school-based teacher educator), and who provides a formal contribution to the development of prospective and active (school) teachers (Swennen, 2012). Smith holds that teacher educators are responsible for providing teachers-to-be with strong foundations of professional knowledge and with tools for ongoing, independent professional development (Smith, 2005).

Historically, given the continuous development of teacher education, there have been increasing types of teacher educators participating in teacher education and training; geographically, the pattern of teacher education varies across countries, as does the identity of teacher educators. In this paper, teacher educators mainly refer to the teacher educators in higher education who help teachers-to-be lay a solid foundation of professional knowledge and instruct professional development skills to them. They are the leaders or tutors of teachers' professional development. The professional development of teacher educators refers to the process by which teacher educators consciously and proactively learn and improve their professional knowledge, professional competence and professional literacy, in an externally guided and structured environment. The process includes both pre-service education and in-service training.

## 1.2 Analytical Framework

Certain countries and professional teacher educator institutions have established a series of professional standards on teacher educators. These standards constitute the provision of critical support for which teacher educators can achieve their professional development; they also provide guidelines and specific milestone references for their professional development. Taken together, the professional standards for teacher educators in different countries and institutions can be summarised as evaluating the teacher educators' professional development from four different perspectives: students, self, peers and society (Zhu, 2010). Concretely, these perspectives attest to the fact that, for their students, teacher educators should promote the professional development of teachers-to-be; for themselves, teacher educators should actively participate in lifelong learning, and continuously improve their professional literacy; for their peers, teacher educators should take part in academic collaboration as a constituent part of the academic community; for society as a whole, teacher educators should make constructive contributions. Taking these four perspectives as the basis, the present paper analyses the current situation of the professional development of Chinese teacher educators, examines the current gaps that exist in this context, and puts forward strategies for the purpose of promoting their professional development.

## 2. CURRENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE TEACHER EDUCATORS

### 2.1 Time Constraints as a Result of the Marketisation of Colleges and Universities

Following the introduction of the marketisation of colleges and universities in China, these institutions have attempted to their performance outcomes to control the extra-wage income of teachers and pull them back to classes and scientific research. Traditionally, teachers' responsibility in China has been to "teach and cultivate". However, in the current educational system, teacher educators are typically subject to the most widespread standard, which include integrating teaching and scientific research; specifically, the teaching of undergraduates and postgraduates, publishing academic works, direction of research programs, applying for an obtaining research funds, gaining and managing awards, certificates and a number of governmental grants, among which scientific research plays a dominant role.

The promotion of teachers and the obtaining of tenure are tied with scientific research and academic works, but undergraduate teaching requires teachers to devote themselves to the cause of teaching, which means that teaching frequently conflicts with these competing obligations. (National Center for Educational Development Research, 1994)

In fact, many teacher educators are too busy with scientific research to keep a watchful eye on teaching itself, and the situation of 'preferring scientific research to curriculum research' is intensifying. In the evaluation of teacher educators, their level of research and the number and quality of published research outcomes have constituted the primary criteria, instead of the quality of their teaching, their teaching methods, students' feedback, and other important factors. In this case, the number of papers published in important journals, the direction of provincial or national research programmes, the publication of academic monographs and so forth, tend to be valued over other important factors, no matter whether they are related to the professional development of teachers-to-be or have any practical application values. As a result, the professional development of teachers-to-be is gradually being neglected by many teacher educators.

### 2.2 Support Needed by Teacher Educators for Their Self-Improvement

In undergoing their professional development, teacher educators in China typically encounter various practical problems, and are thus in need of guidelines and support. Some studies have indicated that the professional development of teacher educators has manifested two main orientations among them: one is advocating the internal motivation of self-studies, and the other is emphasising the external monitoring of professional

standards (Chen & Wang, 2012). The professional standards that apply to teacher educators constitute a critical source of support that can help them achieve their professional development, providing concrete instructions and milestones for this. Currently, China does not have its own established professional standards for teacher educators. Therefore, for the purpose of further development, teacher educators usually try to obtain professional development opportunities by upgrading their academic qualifications, through self-reflection and self-studies. At present, Chinese colleges and universities recognise high academic qualifications, so the level of academic qualifications also constitutes an important criterion in measuring the capacity and level of teachers' professional development. In light of this, many teacher educators prioritise the upgrading of academic qualifications as an important path towards broadening their professional development and vision. However, to date, no specialised institution has been established with regard to the professional cultivation needs of teacher educators, nor to provide specific training to boost their professional knowledge and skills. Moreover, teacher educators are often too busy dealing with all kinds of assessments to take part in team collaboration or regular and face-to-face mutual assistance among colleagues. For new teacher educators, sharing negative professional experiences may not be their favourite aspect of their role, as they may be apprehensive of being questioned about their professional competence. For experienced teacher educators, as soon as they have formed their own professional knowledge basis, active reflection and ongoing professional development may cease to hold the same level of importance. However, both of these groups need a professional development atmosphere in which to thrive, which would include relevant guidelines and support networks.

### **2.3 Less Participation in Professional Collaboration**

Teachers' professional development does not end with building up their knowledge and teaching skills alone; rather, this should also include their all-round progress in terms of awareness of the goals they want to achieve, their collaborative ability with other teachers, and so forth. In terms of collaborative ability, studies indicate that teachers manifest a type of individualism at work instead of professional collaboration, as they shy away from collaborating with their colleagues and are unwilling to accept criticisms from them, and there is a lack of both the demand and the habit of collaboration among teachers (Lortie, 1975). Teacher educators also face the same problem: Due to the insufficiency of recognition of teacher educators' needs and support, most teacher educators hold a self-contained outlook on development and have no consciousness of team collaboration-based development. That is to say, their professional development mainly depends on self-reflection, reading,

and the accumulation of experience instead of active participation in professional group dialogues—all learning activities undertaken at the individual level. This gap has arguably resulted in numerous challenges in the process of promoting professional collaboration among teacher educators. For example, it has placed teacher educators, especially new ones, in a state of isolation when seeking for professional development, in such a way that when they encounter a problem, they tend to search for the answer from books, Internet, or one or two familiar colleagues.

### **2.4 Lack of Emphasis on Social Service Abilities**

Teaching, scientific research and social service are three major functions of modern colleges and universities in China. Here, 'social service' refers to the direct and service-oriented activities provided by colleges and universities by virtue of their advantages in teaching, scientific research, personnel, knowledge and so forth, for the purpose of promoting economic and social development. At policy level, it is emphasised that teacher educators are supposed to be an active participant in this aspect, and their social service ability is supposed to be an important aspect of their professional development. However, in present practice, attention is rarely paid to the connotation, improvement and other related issues of the social service ability of teacher educators as teachers., meaning that their social service ability has not been incorporated into the remit of their formal professional development. Seen from the perspective of pre-service cultivation, entry education, in-service training and other stages in the professional development of teacher educators, pre-service cultivation is mainly oriented at improving their teaching ability and scientific research ability, while in-service training usually entails further education provided for the purposes of upgrading their academic qualifications and improving their theoretical knowledge.

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## **3. PROPOSED STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE TEACHER EDUCATORS**

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### **3.1 Establishing a Composite Mechanism for Appraisal and Evaluation**

Currently, the evaluation of Chinese teacher educators is not so different from that of other teachers in universities and colleges. The focus tends to be on the papers they have published, the research programmes they are involved with, and so forth, instead of whether they have promoted the professional development of teachers-to-be or their own teaching ability, or indeed whether or not the papers they have published are related in any way to the

professional development of teachers. What China should arguably attempt to do is to reform the mechanism of the appraisal and evaluation of teacher educators and change the current situation of overemphasising the appraisal of scientific research ability. Although the professional development of teacher educators should comprise all-round progression in teaching, scientific research, professional collaboration, social service ability and so forth, the ability of individual teacher educators may differ in certain aspects. On that account, the measures adopted by the colleges and universities in Hubei Province could be rolled out to enable a graded review of teachers' professional titles, thus constructing a composite appraisal and evaluation mechanism. For example, as far as teacher educators with a prominent teaching ability are concerned, close attention can be paid to evaluating their achievements in terms of teaching level, teaching quality, teaching methods, students' feedback and talent cultivation, thus ultimately guiding these teachers in strengthening their teaching ability. For teacher educators devoted to scientific research, close attention can be paid to determining the quality of their research outcomes and evaluating whether they are helpful for the professional development of teachers-to-be. As for those with an outstanding social service ability, close attention can be paid to investigating the applications, market application values, future development prospects, and so forth, of their research outcomes. In brief, the evaluation of teacher educators should not be based exclusively on papers and scientific research, so that those devoted to teaching and scientific research outcomes may also find space for self-development opportunities.

### **3.2 Establishing Professional Standards for Teacher Educators and Improving the Education and Training System**

China has already established professional standards for teachers (trial edition); however, in the field of teacher educators, there is still a gap in terms of standards. The professional standards for teacher educators mainly serve three functions. Firstly, at the group level, they serve as tools of conversation and exchange, and are helpful for studying the definition, professional role, professional literacy and other important researched elements of teacher education. Secondly, at the individual level, they provide support and specific instructions for the professional development of teacher educators. Finally, at the institutional level, they are established for the ultimate purpose of promoting the professional development of teacher educators. Overall, these standards provide important guidance for relevant institutions as to which teacher educators are complying with the level expected of them, this aiding to a certain extent the selection and cultivation of the next generation of teacher educators.

It can be argued that pre-service education should differentiate teacher educators from general teachers

in colleges and universities and, with regard to the professional demands of teacher educators, professional institutions should be established for the cultivation of teacher educators. In China's doctoral programmers for teacher education, the cultivation of teacher educators mainly follows two patterns: Doctor of Education (EdD) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). In the preliminary stage, these two degrees undertake different but crossed cultivation goals. On the one hand, the EdD mainly aims to cultivate high-quality teacher education practitioners, including primary and secondary school principals, curriculum experts, teacher educators, teaching appraisers and so forth, and in most cases employs the theoretical knowledge gained from research studies to solve the problems encountered in education and teaching practice. On the other hand, the PhD aims to cultivate future researchers, scholars and professors working at the departments of education at colleges and universities, and places more emphasis on theoretical and traditional academic research. However, as far as the two curriculum systems in Chinese colleges and universities are concerned at present, there is no major difference between the two. In terms of entry education, formal education is usually provided to new teacher educators, the contents of which include teaching, scientific research, social service, professional collaboration, and so forth. In terms of in-service education, 'general teachers in colleges and universities' and 'teacher educators' are differentiated for the purposes of reducing the theoretical teaching of training contents and highlighting the practicality, situationality and demonstrability of the teaching process. This then leads to training contents that, in theory, can improve the teaching ability, research ability and instruction ability of teacher educators.

### **3.3 Promoting the Construction of Teacher Educators' Professional Learning Communities**

Currently, while teacher education institutions in China do exist, these are not professionally recognized bodies. Professional organisations such as Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), The Dutch Association for Teacher Educators (VELON), and The Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), The Flemish Association for Teacher Educators (VELOV), and so forth, have all conducted specific studies on teacher educators. They also support the professional development of teacher educators by means of introducing professional standards for teacher educators, maintaining the professional certification of teacher educators, evaluating their development, studying their knowledge basis, organizing meetings, and publishing related papers and studies. In light of this, China could learn some useful lessons and establish its own association for teacher educators in order to provide a supportive and encouraging atmosphere for them and also to encourage teacher educators to proactively take part in professional teacher education activities.

At the same time, efforts should be made to facilitate the construction of teacher educators' professional learning communities, and to organize reciprocal collaborative learning. As learners and collaborators, teachers in these professional learning communities may devote themselves to the professional activities of their communities. A positive outcome of this could be the strengthened sharing of and innovation in professional knowledge.

### **3.4 Value Social Service Ability as an Important Indicator of Teacher Educators' Professional Development**

Policy makers should incorporate the improvement of social service abilities into policies regarding the training and development of teacher educators, expounding the connotation, specific elements and expected standards involved. Crucially, we recommend that they take the social service ability of teacher educators as a critical starting point and end result of the training. It is also very important to reform the current social service evaluation system and substantially incorporate social service evaluation into the annual appraisal, promotion trajectory, professional title assessment, etc., of teacher educators.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, given that teacher educators in China undertake multiple professional roles, a multi-faceted approach should be adopted in order accurately to evaluate their professional development. This is recommended instead of the current approach, which takes as its starting point their role as researchers rather than educators *per se*, and evaluates them using quantitative indicators such as the number of papers they have published, the number of research grants they hold, and so forth. In addition, China should strengthen its research efforts on teacher educators and establish a professional development support system for them. Such a system could take the shape of professional institutions for teacher educators

that introduce professional standards they are to abide by, thus ultimately guiding and promoting their development.

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