Factors Contributing to Novice Teacher Educator Professional Development in A Chinese Normal University

-- A Qualitative Study on the Social Ecosystem Theory

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Abstract

This study mainly discusses factors affecting novice teacher educator professional development in a Chinese normal university from the perspective of the Social Ecosystem Theory. It has valuable practical reference to shed light on the development of novice teacher educators in the first five years and listen to their voices and thoughts, but domestic research has not paid enough attention to the developmental process of this specific group. Findings have revealed that affecting factors are summarized as individual level, interpersonal level, and social level from the micro, meso and macro layers. On the personal level, personal characteristics, including empathy, learnablity, and adaptability, infuse the ontological value of teacher educators' lives; on the interpersonal level, the support of important others and colleagues can establish an ideal impression at the beginning of their career; on the social level, the tolerant and inclusive working place can help them to establish a stable psychological mechanism.

Keywords

Novice teacher educator; Professional development; Teacher education.

1. Introduction

Research on the professional development of novice teacher educators is a young field. Professional development has been studied extensively, while it has been barely researched on becoming a teacher educator (Montenegro, 2015) [1]. Murry (2019) also claimed that teacher educators belong to an overlooked and devalued occupational group [2]. However, becoming a novice teacher educator is often filled with tension. Nevertheless, the transformation and upgrading of teacher education have also posed challenges to Chinese teacher educators, especially in normal universities. Due to the competitive job market, teacher educators have to stay abreast with higher job demands to increase the employability of their graduates to call for the requirements of excellent research-oriented, highly-educated teachers, who are greatly demanded by teaching frontiers.

The teacher education system of China has basically realized the transition from a three-level system to a two-level system. An open and flexible teacher education system with normal universities as the main body and comprehensive universities as the participants takes shape. Normal universities undertake "Double Shoulder Task" to intertwine higher education with basic education, whereas teachers instructed by teacher educators will ensure the landing of core competence, also conduct practical researches. This echoes on a significant part of teacher educators' work, in addition to teaching teachers, should be to conduct research (Lunenburrg, Dengerink, and Korthhagen, 2014) [3]. In this regard, teacher education in normal universities is dual, namely, normal and academic. Teacher educators are an intertwining and complementary combination of an exclusive researcher and an exclusive practitioner (Tack et

al., 2019) [4], which may give scope for teacher educators' professional knowledge. Besides, teacher educators are entangled with confusion and perplexity when they need to find a relative balance point in the scientific intersection of teachers' identity and researchers' identity (Lu & Zhou, 2016) [5]. By and large, mention novice teacher educators, and their "external and internal" mutualistic transformation include their role fusion, identity attribution, their elasticity to handle their stress, and their reconciliation to be more flexible to their multiple roles have sprung up in academic circles (Ruan et al, 2020) [6]. In parallel to their professional identity, Murray and Male (2005) concluded that it took up to 3 years to establish an identity as a teacher of teachers and that the process was long and sometimes difficult as "feelings of professional unease and discomfort were particularly acute ... [especially] when the substantial and situational selves of the teacher educators were seen as distinctly out of alignment" (p. 139) [7].

No one will give a beginning teacher educator a manual on what to do (Garvis, 2012) [8]. While they may come across dilemmas or obstacles in the path of their professional growth, how they progress through, what their professional growth paths are and the affecting factors are worth researching. That is to say, it is of great necessity to focus on the development of novice teacher educators, grasp the regular pattern, and find out the differences and similarities, which help them grapple with conflicts and carry forward this dynamic and knotty progress. Therefore, this study casts light on factors contributing to novice teacher educator professional development.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Ecosystem Theory

Social Ecosystem Theory emphasizes the interaction of human and social system elements in the environment, and has an important impact on human social behavior. In the new edition of Understanding Human Behavior and Social Environment, Charles Zastrow (2004) concluded that the hierarchy of social ecosystem, which is divided into micro system, meso system and macro system [10]. This model can dynamically show the interaction within the micro system and the relationship between the various layers of social system.

2.2. Onion Model

''Onion model'', as a competency model broadly adopted in human resources, shows that various layers of people can be influenced. Only the outer level (environment and behavior) can be directly observed by others. Competencies are generally conceived of as an integrated body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Stoof, Martens, & Van Merrie.nboer, 2000) [9]. By contrast, this layer is equivalent to the iceberg above water as external parts. Korthagen (2004) elucidated that a teacher's competencies are determined by his/her beliefs, namely what beliefs people have about themselves, therefore their professional belief may go through an overthrow or a shift [10]. In the fifth level, the concept of professional identity is constructed as "self-image" or "self-concept". While the utmost interior core refers to the level of mission, known as a trans-personal and spiritual level (Dilts, 1990) [11], it gives meaning to one's own expertise. This model sheds light on personal qualities (Tickle, 1990) [12] and reveals that although there are discrepancies between six levels, the congruence or alignment within a balance point can be pursued when these interior components come together cohesively that are compatible with environments.

Figure 1. The onion: a model of levels of change

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods

This study mainly adopts qualitative research methods, using literature reading, personal in-depth interview, narrative inquiry and other forms to collect and sort out the data, and carries out qualitative research methods.

3.2. Participants

This study focuses on novice teacher educators in a Chinese normal university. Novice teacher educators teaching different subjects and courses in the same university but from different colleges are selected as participants. The technique of purposive sampling can select qualified samples as a specific group in a certain context more effectively. In order to protect the anonymity, participants have been identified by specific codes, as A to G. This study has investigated seven teacher educators in total, which are selected based on their genders (three males and four females), working experiences (three novice, two in middle stages of the career, four in latter stages of the career) and working institutions (same normal universities, different colleges, mainly as branches of education). To some extents, they can represent novice teacher educators in different departments of normal universities.

Table 1. General information of participants

Participants	Gender	Service Years as Teacher Educators (years)	Experience as Teacher (years)	Qualifications
A	Female	1.5	1.5	PhD in Developmental and Educational Psychology
B	Male	1.5	4.5	PhD in English Education
C	Female	5	8	PhD in English Education
D	Male	0.5	0.5	PhD in Paleography (Ancient Chinese Characters)
E	Female	5.5	5.5	PhD in Management
F	Female	3	15	PhD in Literature and Art Studies
G	Male	0.5	0.5	Postdoctoral Degree in Pure Mathematics

3.3. Data Collection

Qualitative data in this study were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Within this semi-structured format, the interviews were as open as possible, allowing the interviewer to pursue any unexpected responses and to reflect on each interviewee's experiences and perceptions of her/his real career lifespan, as well as their professional developments or growth, which amplify the exploration of context-bound issues.

3.4. Data Analysis

In-depth interviews with seven novice teacher educators from three different colleges of a normal university were conducted . Each interview was conducted face-to-face or online in the form of one-to-one. The language is Chinese and each interview lasts no less than 30 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and transcribed verbatim for analysis, 57,508 characters in total. sorted out the whole interview and tried to find out the developmental process and affecting factors of novice teacher educators. After reading the interview materials repeatedly, topic coding was conducted in NVivo 12.0.

By the usage of open coding, the data collecting from the interviews were subjected to content analysis, which generated a certain number of categories according to these two aspects on research questions. The resulting codes were refined by repeated analysis and then used to define recurring themes and patterns, resulting in the creation of core categories. This inductive process enabled unexpected elements of the data to be analyzed.

4. Findings

4.1. Affecting Factors

With the affecting factors of teacher professional development entering the perspective of researchers, researchers realized that exploring the factors of teacher professional development is the premise and basis for promoting teacher professional development. Therefore, it is necessary for us to explore the affecting factors of professional development of teacher educators as a special group of "teacher of 'teacher'". This part will focus on and analyze the affecting factors of the professional development of novice teacher educators from the micro level, such as the personal characteristics, emotions, values, knowledge and abilities of teachers.

4.1.1. Personal Level

Jobs for novice teacher educators are like a conglomerate that involved multiple responsibilities and commitments. Wood and Borg (2010) also reported the various challenges novice teacher educators might confront upon their entry into higher education. Both internal (e.g., a lack of personal resilience and coping mechanism) and external factors (e.g., emergent research demands) impeded their sense-making and identity growth as legitimate teacher educators [13]. From personal level, this study may find that personal qualities, which can be divided into three dimensions: (1) empathy (2) learnability (3) adaptability, will instill vitality for their sustainable developments, and maintain their enthusiasm for teacher education arena. These vivid personal qualities, enhance their beliefs and identifications as teacher educators.

Grotberg (1997) defined resilience as the "human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity" [14]. Personal resilience, as well as personal qualities, can used to generalized learnability and adaptability. "In my opinion, it may include personal characteristics, such as whether some of my personal characteristics can adapt to the environment well: comfort, enough relearning ability, such acceptance, maximum, such flexibility etc., which are some personal characteristics. (A, Jan 7th, 2020) " Novice teacher educators conduct self-study actively to help them build their teacher education knowledge system. "In the field of education, these suggestions and ideas given by other teachers can only

be one direction, and also need me to understand and read their articles and books on Education published in some magazines. For the time being? It's impossible to be 'fat' all of a sudden! It is also a stage of self-learning. (G, Mar 4th, 2020) " In this new field, self-study ability, known as learnability, will help them to compensate for their insufficient professional knowledge, and be prone to a qualified teacher educator.

4.1.2. Interpersonal Level

With internal causes, there are the motivation and sensitivity to seek positive factors in the environment. Professional induction of novice teacher educators implies the support mechanism needed in one's transition to a different workplace and helps in the development of new professional practices related to teaching, research and supervision. These can be attributed to lenient and tolerable contextual sources (collegial support, institutional policy, academic discourses) also determines whether novice teacher educators can smoothly go through this induction period.

In this study, participants mention that interpersonal relationship will help them feel more secured and relieved about their future developments. Some of them quoted that they are treated as a "newbie" as well as a "little child" without any former experiences in this unfamiliar field, that experienced teacher educators will share their teaching materials or experiences with them. Basically, they know little about students' developmental needs, levels and their future ambitions, and their understanding are derived from their senior teachers. "Teachers are very willing to provide all kinds of suggestions. At the beginning, if there is no class, they will help, or think about you. You can listen to this class. Maybe you don't know at the beginning how much I should ask college students for, how to manage them, and then what kind of way. The senior teacher may be very willing to guide, you can ask at any time, to exchange ideas with them. (A, Jan 7th, 2020) "With senior colleagues support and selfless help, novice teacher educators will accelerate their growth path to fill in the gap of their insufficient professional knowledge and skills. They will gain emotional support to attach themselves more to the environments, to their colleges, to their colleagues, which will bring them a sense of belongings and tenacious believes that in this land, they will grow well and take root consistently.

4.1.3. Social Level

Referring to Yuan (2019), the mounting research pressure added to feelings of insecurity and anxiety about novice teacher educator's job [15]. Therefore, appropriate research requirements will make novice teacher educators feel more flexible and stress-free. Low-stake research environment are salutary for novice teacher educators to alleviate their tensions and stress. Besides, the lenient and tolerable environments allow novice teacher educators not to steer their researching focus to the field of teach education, although teacher educators are equipped with the spontaneity to embrace research transformation, combine with their current researches, and initiate self-exploration.

Working environments and interpersonal relationships as a holistic entity can forge a fecund field for novice teacher educators to root in, while for novice teacher educators in the middle of their career, they mention that collegial support as a practical cooperative entity can be seen as their driving force to move forward. "Some of my existing teams, now also known as the cooperative community of teacher educators, and I'll absorb their advantages. In fact, there is a lot of learning from them. I think the mutual influence among members is very important. Because everyone is developing, in fact, people are the most critical resource. I still feel that there is support, team strength and motivation for me. So I'd like to say that there will be obstacles, problems and contradictions, but these are not motivations? When we discuss and solve these problems, it's not exactly the driving force. (F, Mar 4th, 2020)"

4.1.4. Integration of Affecting Factors

According to Social Ecosystem Theory, from macro level, working environments of teacher educator's professional growth are objectively needed, which are derived from social progress and educational development's norms for teachers' roles and behavioral improvement; from meso level, harmonious interpersonal relationship will be conductive to build up confidence and trusts in the continuum; the perspective of micro level, teachers' self-improvement, stemming from teachers' self-aspirations, needs, and practical pursuit. Zhang (2016) believed that internal demand is the driving force for professional development, and the external environment guarantees endogenous demand, and the endogenous demand can in turn stimulate the corresponding external environment, like the "onion" model [16].

The relaxed and tolerant working atmosphere, the good interpersonal relationship of mutual assistance and mutual concern, and the positive support mechanism have all created a positive psychological mechanism for teacher growth, active integration, and a sense of belonging. The support of the environment, the help of colleagues, active interaction, and active guidance, and open academic exchanges have encouraged novice teacher educators to pursue professional growth even more. Therefore, the external cause acts on the internal cause, making the internal cause more powerful. With the internal cause, it can lay the foundation for the subject's capture of the external environment's power and sensitivity, thereby catalyzing its own growth.
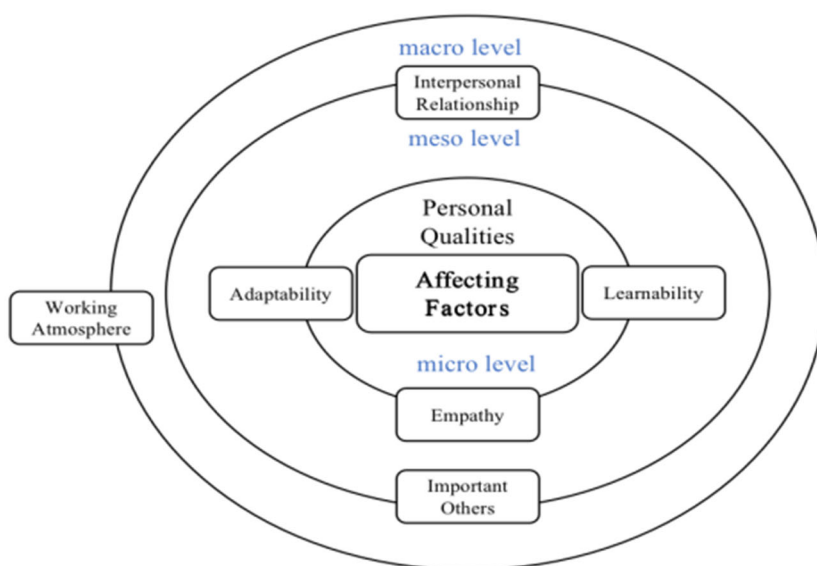
Figure 2. The integration of affecting factors

There is an interior connection between the factors that promote teacher development. Teacher educators themselves are also one of the elements that make up environmental factors, and they are part of the community of teacher practice. The growth, progress, emotional feelings and experience they have gained have also optimized the overall macro environments. According to Yang (2015), a good cultural atmosphere helps to promote the process of educational reform, promote teachers' collective behavior, and transform it into teachers' rational and conscious pursuit of educational teaching, scientific research, social service and other behaviors, which exerting the mutual impact of factors from micro, meso and macro levels [17].

5. Conclusions

This study discusses the process and affecting factors of the development of novice teacher educators, aiming to help them find their own roles through interviews with novice teacher educators, to explore how novice teachers who enter the teacher education field can achieve professional growth, how environmental mechanisms and internal dynamic mechanisms from micro, meso and macro level affect their developments, and how novice teachers be influenced by Chinese policy background, which hopes to exert its practical value for promote the future developments of novice teacher educators.

Affecting factors can be generated from micro, meso and macro level, which indicate the environment and one's own inner strength respectively. Novice teacher educators deepen their missions constantly and then embrace a professional growth. The incentive mechanism of their professional growth often comes from the conglomerate of the support of endogenous motivation and the catalyst of new environments. Therefore, the combination of the inner and outer parts of the "Onion" Model will give momentum to their professional developments. The core factor of teachers' professional development is the consciousness and ability of professional development. Novice teacher educator deepens its core power, and the internal demand and external force work together. From the micro level, the internal needs of novice teacher educators come from his personal growth perception, namely, his internal motivation, the attraction of teacher education field to him, that is, how much centripetal force he has in this field, which confirms the alignment between the environments and the inner strength according to "Onion" Model.

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