



The influence of the ecological contexts of teacher education on South Korean teacher educators' professional development



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The influence of the ecological context of teacher education is investigated.
- South Korean teacher educators' main concern is related to conducting research.
- The influence of the global context is strong and affects lower contextual levels.
- Reflective methods are recommended for teacher educators' professional development.

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ABSTRACT

This study is designed to explore how the ecological context of teacher education influences affect South Korean teacher educators' professional development. Research findings reveal that South Korean teacher educators' concerns about their professional development are mainly related to conducting research influenced by global, political, social, and institutional influences together. The global influences permeate lower contextual levels in order and appear as concrete policies affecting teacher educators' work. As a result of an environment that favors academic achievement in various levels of the ecological contexts of teacher education, South Korean teacher educators desire more international academic communication.

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1. Introduction

In the same way as high-quality classroom teachers make a difference in their students' learning, so can teacher educators make a difference in teachers' learning. Therefore, it is no wonder that student teachers cited teacher educators—specifically “education professors” and “cooperating teachers”—as the role models who had been most helpful in modeling their instructional styles and whose strategies were worth emulating in their teaching (AACTE, 1987).

Although teacher educators play an important role in all types of educational reforms (Cochran-Smith, 2003), in-depth research about the characteristics of teacher educators' professional lives has not been conducted (Martinez, 2008). Indeed, the editors of a special edition for teacher educators in *Teaching and Teacher Education* (Korthagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005) claimed that a number of important questions that focus on teacher educators has

begun to emerge. For example, what do teacher educators do and how is their work constructed? What support is necessary for the professional development of teacher educators (p. 109)? Smith (2003) attributed this to the absence of a systematic routine for the professional development of teacher educators, saying that, “Most professional development of teacher educators is likely to be individual, spontaneous, and unnoticed by teacher educators themselves and their supervisors” (p. 210).

In South Korea, people have paid little attention to teacher educators' work, and it has certainly not been studied extensively. In addition, discussions about improving teacher education quality in South Korea have focused on using external controls, not stimulating the autonomous motivation of teacher educators and future teachers. For example, the Korean government has tried to amend and strengthen the national teacher employment exam, which is a requirement for all teacher candidates prior to employment, as a way to improve the quality of teachers. As a result, senior student teachers only focus on preparing for the exam during their last school year, and more and more student teachers are concerned about the exam early on in their school careers.

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Given this circumstance, teacher educators' competencies are critical for preparing future teachers to adjust to the real-school world that they will face after passing the exam. Nevertheless, the questions of how teacher educators try to develop their expertise and what their concerns and needs are for their professional development have never been thoroughly addressed. This is because teacher educators, mainly professors in universities, are regarded as professional and respected figures in South Korea. They are therefore assumed to have developed high levels of competency on their own and are hardly questioned about how they do their jobs.

For these reasons, the researcher has explored how to improve the quality of pre-service teacher education by assisting South Korean teacher educators' ongoing learning. In order to support their professional development, the kinds of concerns and needs South Korean teacher educators have with respect to their professional development should first be determined. For example, what kinds of difficulties do they face in their practices? What obstacles block their professional development? What kind of support do they want?

Additionally, the contextual factors of South Korean teacher education that influence teacher educators' work should be considered in order to understand teacher educators' practices thoroughly. Teacher education exists at various contextual levels in South Korea. At a national level, South Korea has a different teacher education system (a national-government-centered system) from those of English-speaking countries. At an institutional level, elementary teacher education and secondary teacher education have different systems. For these reasons, this study explored the following research question, focusing on teacher educators who prepare future elementary school teachers:

How does the ecological context of teacher education influence South Korean teacher educators' concerns and needs with respect to their professional development, particularly those teacher educators who specialize in elementary teacher education?

In order to answer this question, South Korean teacher educators' characteristics, their concerns and needs for their professional development, their professional development experiences, their relationships with other people in their professional development environment, and the influence of their ecological contexts on all of these were investigated.

With respect to the definition of "teacher educators", there are two types: teacher educators in schools who mentor novice teachers and support their professional development by observing their lessons and providing feedback, and educators in institutes of teacher education who teach prospective teachers (Koster, Korthagen, & Wubbels, 1998). In this study, the term "teacher educators" also refers to the teacher educators who are faculty members at institutions of teacher education since they are mainly responsible for the preparation of pre-service teachers through systematic teacher education programs for a period of four school years in South Korea.

2. Theoretical framework

The following paragraphs describe the theoretical background of this research based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory, which offers the main concept about the relationship between human and environments as a layered system. Zeichner's (2006, 2008a,b) framework for teacher education gives a concrete framework of an ecological context of teacher education. The principles for teacher educators' professional development can be found in adult learning theory.

2.1. Social ecology theory

As an extension of Lewin's (1935, 1936) classic equation presenting behavior as a function of the person and their environment, Bronfenbrenner (1979) established his ecological theory of human development with a holistic view. Although his focus was on child development, his model also provides insight into adult learning development (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). He acknowledged that humans develop in relation to multilevel environments, such as family, school, and community, and defined these environments as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems.

First, a microsystem is "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are those that give meaning to the person in a particular situation. The microsystems of teacher educators are therefore a configuration of the teacher educators' activities, roles, and interpersonal relations in teacher education institutions, which are the setting of their microsystems. Because teacher educators are usually considered to be both teachers and researchers (Ducharme, 1986, p. 4; Kenneth & Nancy, 1994), their activities and roles are complex, including both teachers' and researchers' jobs.

The next level of environment is the mesosystem. This refers to the relations between microsystems, for instance, the relation of family experiences to school experiences and family experiences to peer experiences. For teacher educators, the mesosystem comprises the connections between teacher educators' relationships with people outside of teacher education institutions, such as family, school teachers, educational researchers, and officers in the Educational Ministry.

An exosystem refers to "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). With respect to the teacher education field, the exosystem is the environment that indirectly affects teacher educators' work, such as national educational policies, and social and economic conditions.

A macrosystem does not contain a particular subject. It is "the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). This differs for various socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and subculture groups. For teacher educators, this system can include institutional and national cultures, as well as global trends in education.

A chronosystem is "an ecological transition" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26), which occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both. Changes occur throughout a person's lifespan through, for example, marriage, career changes, illness, and retirement. Teacher educators also have these ecological transitions throughout their careers: becoming a teacher educator, being tenured, moving to another institution, retiring, and so on. With each transition, teacher educators acquire new needs and concerns with regard to their professional development.

In creating a conceptual framework for this study, I have included all the aforementioned systems except the chronosystem. The chronosystem is intrinsically very personal and therefore to investigate such a system would necessitate an entirely new study.

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