



# Individual growth and institutional advancement: The in-house model for teacher educators' professional learning

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The in-house model provided support for adapting pedagogic innovation.
- Teacher educators showed self-confidence and professional resilience.
- Teacher educators expressed a feeling of belonging and a sense of commitment.
- Teacher educators constructed collective responsibility for students' learning.
- The community supported institutional transformation into a learning organization.

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher educators have a central role in the advancement of education as they train the next generation of teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Their professional learning and updating is considered essential to the future of the entire educational enterprise (Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010). The professional learning of teacher educators is seen as crucial in many countries such as China (Zhu, 2010), Cyprus (Karagiorgi & Nicolaidou, 2013), the Netherlands (Koster, Dengerink, Korthagen, & Lunenberg, 2008), and Israel (Zohar, 2008). Despite this increased attention, research demonstrates that teacher educators often lack professional support (Harrison & McKeon, 2010; Murray, 2008; Zeichner, 2005). While the professional learning of teachers has been extensively studied (e.g. Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009), little is known about teacher educators' professional learning (Patton & Parker, 2017). In fact, teacher educators

themselves remain “an under-researched, poorly understood, and ill-defined occupational group” (Murray, 2016, p. 35). Recently teacher educators' professional learning has become a topic of interest (Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2011; Kosnik, Miyata, Cleovoulou, Fletcher, & Menna, 2015; Patton & Parker, 2017).

The unique characteristics of teacher educators' learning and identity has been well documented (see Davey, 2013; Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014). Furthermore, Clandinin and Hsu (2017) devote an entire section to this, with four chapters on different aspects of their learning. Evidence of this growing interest is found in the new section initiated by the AERA division K (Teaching and Teacher Education) specifically devoted to teacher educators' learning.

This attention on teacher educators points to the need for further studies on their professional learning by examining their practices, transition challenges and contexts (Kosnik et al., 2015). The current study contributes to the growing discourse on teacher educators' professional learning by exploring one contextual aspect.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Professional learning among teacher educators

In characterizing the professional learning of teacher educators, many researchers (e.g. Loughran, 2014; Murray, 2016) distinguish teacher educators from school teachers. Following this consensus in the research community, we suggest that literature on the professional development of teachers in community has little relevance for the population of teacher educators.

Loughran (2014) argues that autonomy and responsibility for

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their own learning distinguishes teacher educators from school teachers, who rely on outside authorities to set a learning agenda. This characteristic stood out in a European survey showing that most teacher educators perceive their responsibility for their own learning as inextricably bonded with their professional role (Koster et al., 2008). Furthermore, in describing professional obligations of teacher educators, the European Commission stated that primary responsibilities for their professional learning falls on their own shoulders (European Commission, 2013).

Teacher educators typically learn through individual practice, usually in an unstructured manner and based on independent motivation. Only in limited cases is professional learning systematically organized (Lunenberg et al., 2014). We term this path the “self-guided track” (Hadar & Brody, 2017b). An important feature of this route is engaging in research, which includes individual and joint projects as a basis for professional development (Loughran, 2014).

In tandem with this self-guided track, the importance of teacher educators' professional learning has motivated initiatives by professional organizations in different countries. These structured programs can be divided into two paradigms. The first is the inter-institutional model, including programs that serve the varied needs of teacher educators in different institutions who meet in a centralized location to engage in professional learning. These programs are generally initiated by professional organizations (e.g. associations for teacher educators, academic institutions). The second type is comprised of in-house programs initiated by and function within particular institutions with the aim of providing professional learning opportunities for their own faculty.

In inter-institutional programs, teacher educators meet colleagues from other institutions with similar learning interests. One example is the Institute for Research and Development of Programs for Teacher Education Faculty - MOFET in Israel, founded specifically for professional learning of teacher educators. It has developed a variety of learning tracks including instruction and mentoring, academic administration, research, and information and communication technologies (Reichenberg, Kleeman, & Sagee, 2013). It employs a variety of frameworks such as lectures, practicum, conferences, and small group forums. Studies examining the benefits of inter-institutional programs point to improvement of professional skills and constructing professional identities. Furthermore, the meetings and interchange promote allegiance to a teacher educators' community (Reichenberg et al., 2013).

Another example of inter-institutional programs is the “Professional Quality of Teacher Educators” initiated by the Association of Dutch Teacher Educators (Koster et al., 2008). This program offers professional training for certification, as well as continued education. Participants in these programs report changes in knowledge and behavior. Additional outcomes include self-evaluation, quality development, career longevity, and self-efficacy (Koster et al., 2008). Organizations in other countries have also offered programs (see American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2015; Association for Teacher Education in Europe, ATEE, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2011). Research examining program outcomes consistently reports benefits such as development of professional abilities and identities (Lunenberg et al., 2014).

The second structured paradigm for professional learning of teacher educators includes organized learning activities within single academic institutions, addressing the specific needs of the teacher education institution or its faculty. Some institutions focus on integrating 21st century technology in teaching (Cherup & Snyder, 2015). Others focus on topics deemed important for future teachers, such as global warming (University of Maryland College Park, 2015). Other examples include specific skills such as reflection (Jacobs, Assaf, & Lee, 2011), inclusive education in the UK

(Florian, 2012), and subject matter knowledge such as math and language (Zaslavsky & Leikin, 2004).

Learning methods in these programs vary. Seminars and workshops are common in many countries (Kosnik et al., 2011). Sharing aspects of practice is an additional format based on peer observation and feedback, and jointly constructing curriculum and learning processes for students (Loughran, Korthagan, & Russell, 2008; Poyas & Smith, 2007; Schuck, Aubusson, & Buchanan, 2008; Zellermyer & Margolin, 2005). The communal model of teacher educators' in-house professional learning communities is the focus of this study.

## 2.2. Professional learning communities (PLCs)

Recently the model of communal learning has become a common paradigm for professional learning among teacher educators. The frequent use of this model stems from broad evidence that communal learning contributes significantly to professional learning. Termed professional learning community (PLC), this model emphasizes active teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). A PLC is a type of “community of practice,” a term coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe any group of practitioners sharing common interest in a particular topic and working together towards a common goal. Communal learning is considered more effective than traditional approaches (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2008). It is based on Vygotsky's (1978) notion that social context is the source of individual cognition and interaction between learners and that their social surroundings significantly influence knowledge construction. Professional learning is anchored in socio-cultural contexts of collegial work and professional advancement which occurs through social interaction (Lave, 1993). Individual learning is replaced by shared cognition, as the behavior of the learner is explained through interaction between personal cognition and external influences. The communal learning theory emphasizes professional growth within a group in the work setting, a perspective derived from research showing the limitations of an expert in isolation (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983). Thus professional growth of individual teacher educators can best be understood by the social context in which they work and learn (Avalos, 2011).

This approach emphasizes distributed cognition (Salomon, 1993; Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004) focusing on group learning activities. Individual development through experiences in joint activities characterizes communal learning (Sfard, 1998). Such learning creates opportunities for exchanging opinions and ideas, consideration and mutual evaluation of information, and asking questions. In this approach, realization of the individual's learning potential depends on social relationships within the learning group and accumulation of collective knowledge dependent on the abilities of each group member to contribute to this knowledge from their own perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, learning is a web of interactions between people and contexts. Information accumulating through joint efforts is situated in authentic interchange between learners rather than in the minds of isolated individuals (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Learning is contextually dependent and based on reciprocity between learners and the context in which they learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This socio-cultural communal learning theory suggests that teacher educators can learn as well as teach in college settings (Hargreaves, 1994; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Theories of college improvement link learning with participation in institutional activities. Both domains stress integration of work and learning as a necessary condition for development at individual and organizational levels (Hargreaves, 1994; King & Newmann, 2001). Thus,

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