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Bridging the Gap Between Knowledge and Practices in Teacher Education: Building a Professional Learning Community Through Action Research

ZyIn XIONG and Sébastien CHALIES

Introduction

Teachers' knowledge and their teaching practices are often viewed as two sides of the same coin, intertwined and together constituting teachers' professionalism. In teacher education, universities often play a dominant role to provide "formal knowledge" to pre-service teachers, whereas schools tend to be regarded as a substituted place for pre-service teachers to practice what they learnt from the universities (Allen & Wright, 2014; Zeichner, 2015). Evidence shows that such traditional epistemology in teacher education has limitations in supporting pre-service teachers' learning (e.g. Tylor et al., 2014). More research attention is needed on exploring how to build a meaningful integration of the knowledge and practices which pre-service teachers gain from the different sites in teacher education.

A large body of literature has discussed how to reform the traditional paradigm of teacher education, including enhancing university-school partnership (e.g. Lillejord & Børte, 2016), creating a third space (Martin et al., 2011) or a professional community (e.g. Herold & Waring, 2016), etc. However, there are still relatively few studies that are set out from the practitioners' perspective and explore what teacher educators can do in their own capacity to innovate on the traditional practices in teacher education.

This study presents how teacher educators as practitioners can make their own efforts to innovate on traditional university-based teaching in teacher education and to improve the quality of learning for pre-service teachers. To do this, this study built on the concept of "communities of practice" and uses action research as an empowerment approach, to encourage teacher educators to reflect on their knowledge and to mobilise their resources to build a professional learning community. This study provides a real-world example of how teacher educators can change the traditional university-based pedagogy in their own capacity while avoiding the potential institutional constraints. It is hoped that this case study can provoke some theoretical discussions on how to harness the concept of a professional learning community as a meaningful practice in teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is served as the broad theoretical umbrella to guide the researchers, who are also the teacher educators, to build a professional learning community in the teaching and research process. This concept holds that teachers' professional knowledge is built through a collective

participatory process, through which teachers learn “when they generate local knowledge of practice by working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p.250). To facilitate teachers’ learning process, building a professional learning community shall therefore be considered as valuable practices in teacher education. According to Wenger (1998), to build and sustain an effective community of practice, there are at least three requisitions to achieve: (a) mutual engagements of all members (b) shared repertoire of negotiable resources (c) and joint enterprise.

Action research is considered as a complementary theoretical guide in this research. It empowers teacher educators to reflect on their practices and explore strategies to enact the concept of “communities of practice” in the teacher education context. The two theories share similar principles; both value social participation, empowerment, and professional development. Meanwhile, action research advocates the voices of practitioners and encourages them to link research and practices to build their professionalism in a confident and participatory way. By considering teacher educators as researchers, action research allows teacher educators to investigate their own living environment and to explore the potential ways of building an effective professional learning community that addresses the dynamic contextual needs.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

The research design stems from a teacher education programme that aims to develop pre-service teachers’ pedagogical competence on classroom management. Two teacher educators from the University of Toulouse in France and the local secondary school of Bellefontaine participated in the design of this course programme. The teacher educators also worked as researchers and participated in the data collection and data analysis in this study. The participating pre-service teachers in this study are master students in a national degree named “MEEF” (Master de l’enseignement, de l’éducation et de la formation), which is the mainstream track to prepare students to enter the teaching profession in France. In total, 30 pre-service teachers participated in this programme.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all teacher educators and volunteering pre-service teachers after each session of this programme. There were ten sequences of interviews from ten teaching sessions throughout the entire semester. In addition, self-confrontation interviews were conducted with five student teachers to collect information on their learning experiences longitudinally. Self-confrontation interviews (SCI) invited participating pre-service teachers to watch their own practices through video and to explain their cognitive thinking linked to their actions. The specific steps are as follows: (1) researchers use cameras to record targeted participants’ actions in a field situation, (2) the researchers replay the recorded video and present it in front of the participants, (3) researchers invite participants to explain the cognitive thinking

related to their practices in the specific situation.

To complement the interview data, this study also collected the artefacts that the teacher educators and pre-service teachers have produced throughout this course programme. Artefacts can convey many messages in which the cultural and contextual dynamics are manifested (Schein, 1992). These artefacts include the training materials that teacher educators designed on their own; the group learning projects led by pre-service teachers; the peer observation reports produced by pre-service teachers; the textual feedback and exchanges among the participating teachers.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The results of this paper are summarized into three strands.

Firstly, the paper shows that building a professional learning community is an effective approach to support pre-service teachers to bridge the gap between knowledge and practices. It reveals that the professional learning community supports the pre-service teachers' learning by providing resources and supports that allow pre-service teachers to constantly revise and reorganise their theoretical understanding through the entire learning process.

Secondly, this paper revealed that the effectiveness of the professional learning community is largely dependent on teacher educators' engagement through the action research project. To build an effective professional learning community, this study argues that it is necessary to align it with a specific and explicit learning goal, so that every participant can develop a clear understanding of their practices and responsibilities in this community. In this study, a concrete learning module with a clear learning goal provided scaffolding for teacher educators to harness their knowledge and expertise when considering building a professional learning community.

Thirdly, this paper observed that, by combining action research with the concept of professional learning community, both teacher educators and pre-service teachers took initiative to explore innovative pedagogical resources, and tended to develop a more welcoming and open attitude towards pedagogical innovation in their own practices.

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