

Reflection on the Individual Capabilities of Teacher Educators based on the Perspectives of Teacher Educators in Iran and Canada

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ABSTRACT

The study and reflection on the individual capabilities of teacher educators are of special importance due to the role that educators play in education of the students, producing knowledge, and contributing to social development and transformation. This subject was explored from the perspective of experienced teacher educators in the field of teacher training, based on a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Participants in this research were purposefully selected based on three criteria: teaching experience in teacher education, professorial rank for Canadian educators, and two decades of teaching experience for educators at Farhangian University, considering the diversity of groups. A total of 18 educators from Iran and Canada were selected. Data collection was based on individual and semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed based on analytical induction. Seven areas of individual capability were inferred from the data analysis. The areas of motivation and professional commitment, strategic nature, and personal characteristics were emphasized more than other capabilities by both groups of participants, covering a wide range of individual capabilities. Strategic action, motivated by professional commitment and relying on personal capacities in interaction with cognitive abilities, introspection, communication, collectivism, and reflective action operates. Comparing the findings of the two groups of educators showed that despite geographical and cultural differences, there are common professional concerns in the field of individual capabilities of teacher educators, but their manifestation is influenced by the cultural context of the work environment. Farhangian University educators focus on professional roles with a duty-oriented approach, while Canadian teacher educators focus on professional identity with a problem-finding and independent approach. The findings of this research can be considered in designing curriculum of educator education and in developing indicators for promoting educators.

Keywords: Higher education curriculum, teacher education, individual capabilities of educators.



Introduction

Addressing the understanding of individual and organizational capabilities of teacher educators is a challenging topic. Being a teacher educator places an individual in the role of an educator aligned with current and future realities and based on cultural heritage. For this purpose, it is necessary to first have a definition of the concept of "education." Education is a broad concept that encompasses the entirety of individuals' existential personality traits, focusing on the "intellectual and psychosocial growth of individuals," emphasizing the "body and feelings" of learners, prioritizing them over academic subject study, and generally emphasizing the experience of reconstruction and inner transformation.

Professional development of educators has been suggested in two views: group development and individual development (Lunenberg et al. 2014). The first view emphasizes professional and professional identity development shared among educators, which will be discussed later in the article from the perspective of Andrea & Gosling (2005). The second focuses on the individuality of the educator, emphasizing specific and targeted attitudes, knowledge, and skills in the process of professional growth. This article focuses on the second view; capabilities that educators bring to the workplace as individuals and develop through work activities, learning activities, and their reasons for learning in practical situations. Essentially, the fundamental part of the teaching identity is tied to individual capabilities. These are capacities or capabilities that serve as personal capital for entering and maintaining the role of an educator.

Methodology

Based on the research question aiming to explore and describe the individual capabilities of educators from the perspective of active teacher educators, a qualitative research design was used (Yin, 2014) to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon based on research (Creswell, 2012: 16). To access the empirical knowledge of participants who have shared lived experiences in the phenomenon under study, the phenomenological research approach (Gall et al. 2007: 1036) was used to complement the qualitative research design.

Participants in the research were purposefully selected to include 18 educators (8 from Canada and 10 from Farhangian University) based on three criteria: teaching experience in teacher education, professorial rank for Canadian educators, and two decades of teaching experience for Farhangian University educators; considering diversity in groups in fields such as curriculum studies, virtual education, educational leadership, science education, arts education, social studies, Persian language and literature, philosophy, Islamic studies, and higher education from Iran and Canada; and readiness to participate in the research. Data collection was based on individual and semi-structured interviews (Stake, 2000:436) using open-ended response questions (Gall et al. 2007). The research data were analyzed based on analytical induction (Yin, 2014). In this method, the entire text was first read to understand its conceptual structure, then the data coding process was used. This process continued until saturation was reached (Gall et al. 2007: 985).

To verify the validity of the findings, three methods were used: triangulation, member checking, and external audit (Creswell, 2012: 259-260). In this research, the validity of the findings was examined using member checking. For this purpose, a report on how interviews were conducted and the process of analyzing the data obtained from interviews with Canadian professors was given to a participant familiar with phenomenological research in that country to check the accuracy and validity of data collection stages, data coding and analysis, and the accuracy of the themes obtained. After confirming the accuracy and validity of the findings, the research report formed the basis for writing the article.

Findings

The analysis of the research data revealed seven areas: motivation and professional commitment, strategic nature, reflective thinking, introspection, personal characteristics, epistemology, and communication and collectivism. The following sections describe these areas from the perspectives of educators in Canada and Iran.

Motivation and Professional Commitment: This area, as an individual capability, was emphasized by all 18 educators. There was consensus among educators in both geographical regions with different cultural and historical backgrounds on the presence of this capability. Canadian educators emphasized their own professional commitment and dynamism, accountability to students, sacred ideas and professional vision, understanding their role from a broader worldly perspective, and a sense of philanthropy and eagerness for student transformation. Farhangian University educators emphasized seeing themselves in connection with a broader world, love for teaching, attention to the existential dimensions of student education, and understanding the teaching role, overlapping with the views of Canadian educators. The distinction lies in the emphasis Farhangian University educators place on being a model and agent and the dignity of educators, which seems to be rooted in the history and culture of education in Asian countries. Canadian educators emphasized their social responsibility and role towards students. The two areas of motivation and professional commitment and being strategic included the highest themes. This finding indicates the importance of these two areas in the professional development of educators.

Strategic Nature: The research findings in the area of being strategic included the widest range of components. All 18 educators emphasized this capability. Common components emphasized by educators include being a facilitator and supporter, guiding students to inquiry, direction and space creation, creating balance in educational and training roles, self-regulation, self-efficacy, being humanistic, having a mentoring approach, having a multidisciplinary view, spreading a positive self-image in students, creating a space of compassion and hope in students, having a trust-building approach, emphasizing understanding and personal perception of students, prioritizing student rights, having a moral demeanor, having a humane view of students, being positive-minded, and having a supportive approach towards the intellectual and emotional growth of students and creating balance in educational and training roles.

Reflective Thinking: The individual capability of reflective thinking was emphasized by 7 Canadian educators and 5 Farhangian University educators. Canadian educators in the area of reflective thinking follow two cognitive approaches: having a reflective approach towards the dimensions of their professional action as an independent actor, including self-reflection and self-criticism, professional issues, professional performance, professional experience; and having a metacognitive approach towards their lived experiences, goals, and professional priorities, which lends credibility to their internal and external selves in dealing with value conflicts influenced by the work environment and personal belief system. Farhangian University educators emphasized having an adaptive and situational action in dealing with students, and having purposeful reflective performance influenced by value system beliefs, vision, and educational philosophy. Reflecting on the distinctions in the area of reflective thinking between these two groups of educators shows that Canadian educators have reached a systematic and multidimensional intrinsic reflective thinking.

Introspection: The area of introspection is closely related to reflective thinking. 7 Canadian educators and 5 Farhangian University educators emphasized having this capability. Canadian educators in this area follow approaches of self-exploration and self-awareness; creating an inner mental space and expanding the inner mental space. Discovering inner mental capacities and expanding the inner mental space can be a reliable cognitive source for reflective action, independent action, and creating opportunities and possibilities for an educator in dealing with challenges and conflicts in the work environment. Farhangian University educators in connection with the theme of introspection follow a self-assessment approach.



Epistemology: The area of epistemology as an individual capability was confirmed by 7 Canadian educators and 4 Farhangian University educators. Canadian educators in the area of epistemology emphasized understanding the knowledge of transpersonal psychology and sociology for analyzing their own and others' social behavior, understanding multidisciplinary knowledge to reach a comprehensive understanding of pedagogy, having a thirst for knowledge, and increasing their own learning capacity. Farhangian University educators emphasized acquiring scientific and professional literacy.

Communication and Collectivism: The capability of establishing communication and collectivism was emphasized by 7 Canadian educators and 5 Farhangian University educators. All Canadian educators, except the virtual education educator, emphasized having this capability. The capability of communication and collectivism in this group of educators was accompanied by two approaches: an approach focused on educators' communication with the organizational community and academic group for their own development and group synergy, such as motivation for group participation and synergy, a sense of belonging to the group, and humility in learning from students; and an approach focused on educators' communication with students for the development of students, such as listening with a sense of solidarity and empathy, flexibility in dealing with student needs, and being accessible. The capability of communication and collectivism in Farhangian University educators was accompanied by two approaches: an approach focused on educators' communication with students for the development of students, such as establishing empathetic interpersonal communication with the student and establishing communication with the student based on human relations; and an approach dependent on conditions, such as interpersonal communication based on ethics and situational awareness. From the statements of this group of educators regarding an approach focused on educators' communication with the organizational community and academic group for their own development and group synergy, no themes were inferred and it is worth reflecting upon, as this approach plays an important role in the individual and group development of educators at Farhangian University. It seems that being together and conducting scientific activities in a group and team manner among Farhangian University educators has been neglected or faced challenges.

Personal Characteristics: Personal characteristics is a capability that was emphasized by all 18 educators from Canada and Farhangian University. In terms of frequency, all educators agreed on having this capability, but in terms of the type of characteristic, they had aspects of similarity and distinction. Canadian educators believed that a university educator should be confident and self-respecting, humble, unpretentious, and loving, and strive for knowledge enhancement with an open and patient mind. Farhangian University educators in the area of personal characteristics emphasized a wider range of characteristics, including emotional intelligence such as understanding the world of others, loving and respecting others, self-belief, creativity, and extroversion; ethics such as being ethical, not being narcissistic, being trustworthy, keeping secrets, and having an independent personality; and characteristics based on religious teachings such as being monotheistic, patience and resilience in facing challenges, and perfectionism.

Conclusion

The analysis of data related to teacher educators in Iran and Canada revealed a range of individual capabilities in seven areas: personal characteristics, strategic nature, reflective thinking, motivation and professional commitment, introspection, epistemology, communication and collectivism. The inferred areas are intertwined and homogeneous in the concept of "teacher's existential self" in its "true" sense. From the findings, it can be inferred that in addition to specialized knowledge, a range of individual capabilities is necessary for being an educator. In other words, having a doctoral degree is one of the professional components that indicates possession of specialized knowledge, but it cannot be the main indicator for recruiting faculty members as educators (Sharplin, 2011).

The most conceptual overlap was in the area of motivation and professional commitment. This overlap indicates the common belief and understanding of the two groups of educators regarding the importance of their professional identity and role. The highest frequency of themes was in the area of being strategic. This finding indicates that to be an educator, it is necessary to have an open, creative, and flexible mind to systematically fulfill one's professional role.

Reflecting on the themes and dimensions of individual capabilities of being an educator can be used as primary data alongside other documents and related sources for designing the curriculum for higher education teacher training. It can also be used in drafting the guidelines for recruiting, retaining, and promoting university educators, specifically at Farhangian University, and in developing part of the course outlines for professional development programs for university educators. It should be noted that developing the individual capabilities of educators is not a prescriptive matter, but rather requires internal transformation and will need a transformative curriculum that emphasizes reconstruction and inner transformation.

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