

## Pakistani Teacher-educator Professional Learning Through an International Blended Course

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### Abstract

International teacher-educator learning supports a more complex vision of teacher professionalism for both developed and developing countries. The aim of this paper is the analysis of Pakistani teacher-educator professional learning after attending an international blended course, considering the impact of online and face-to-face participation and the main competencies involved in their professional learning. The blended learning course attended by the Pakistani Teacher-educators is part of an international project between Europe and Asia. The analysis is carried out using written traces in the online platform; 47 questionnaires at the end of the face-to-face training sessions in Pakistan and 10 deep-interviews with Pakistani educators; the written traces, open questions, and deep-interviews were qualitatively analyzed. Additionally, the educators' technological, pedagogical and instructional design and interpersonal and intercultural skills were also analysed. The paper considers how international learning could affect the professional learning of teacher-educators in Global South and the centrality of the design of innovative learning courses for today's environment of international globalization.

**Keywords:** Teacher-educator, Blended learning, International, Professional Learning, Design

### Introduction

A central role in teacher training is given to teacher-educators, a particular group of professionals with specific responsibilities, expertise and commitments in their respective educational systems (Kelchtermans, Smith & Vanderlinde, 2018). The development of their expertise constitutes an important issue, considering their leading and modelling role in assuring quality and the introduction of technological and pedagogical innovation. However, in a hyper-connected world, the initial and continuing teacher training proposed by higher institutions remains somewhat limited to national borders, with a need to meet the emerging challenge of increased openness and cross-institutional collaboration, both formal and informal, among higher education institutions and practitioners (Inamorato dos Santos, Punie & Castaño-Muñoz, 2016; Nerantzi, 2018). Consequently, teacher-educators often deal with the national perspective and are not incentivized to confront international issues. Furthermore, research on the professional preparation of teacher-educators is less widely researched than that of teachers (Kelchtermans, Smith & Vanderlinde, 2018), as is their international professional learning.

The deep introduction of technology in the so-called Global South starts to introduce some change in the quality of teacher-educators' professionalism. More research is needed to analyze the effects and impacts of international training on local teaching practices of teacher-educators.

Indeed, fostering international training and sharing of practices between teacher-educator could be a strategy to tackle common issues in a wider and more complex vision of teacher professionalism for both developed and developing countries. Considering this, the aim of the paper is the analysis of the impact of an international blended course on Pakistani teacher-educators' professional learning. A theoretical discussion is presented about the international teacher-educators' professional learning, especially supported by blended learning modality. Afterward, the study about Pakistan teacher-educators professional learning is presented and discussed.

### **Why does the professional learning of international teacher-educators matter?**

The word 'teacher-educator' covers a mixed and diverse group of professionals considering the great differences across countries (Berry, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Kelchtermans, Smith & Vanderlinde, 2018). This paper adopted the general definition of all those in teaching or research who actively facilitate the learning of student-teachers and teachers (European Commission, 2013).

Following the considerations of Snoek, Swennen and van der Klink (2011), the intensive international exchange of learning by teacher-educators will contribute to their increased professionalism. Engaging in an international training course gives new knowledge to teacher-educators but also gives them an opportunity to challenge themselves with the management of resources, building of new relationships and growing a professional network that could play a role in modelling their professional career. Indeed, professionalism is built through a long process based on information, knowledge exchange and studying one's own daily classroom practices, as well as learning with and from peers, enhancing the experience of others (Ritchie, 2018). Active participation in a learning community brings the sharing of experiences and meaning, facilitating a new form of collaboration and an active knowledge building process, with open discussion, sharing, negotiation, and integration of ideas (Gruber, 2018). For this, it is important that teacher-educators be exposed to innovative training, with an international and intercultural perspective too, as supported, for example, by the European Union with the Erasmus programme's mobility or the Capacity Building programme.

### **The role of Blended Learning to foster International Professional Learning**

In recent years, many teacher learning initiatives proposed by higher education for initial or continuing training have been developed through the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) movement (for a discussion in a European perspective, see Schuwer et al., 2015), including blended learning (BL) to meet the challenge of keeping teachers professionally up-to-date and providing them with professional development opportunities on a continuing basis (Philipson, Tondeur & Zhu, 2016).

Considering that the definition of BL encompasses different educational experiences, modes of communication, types of technologies, methods of learning, time management and skills involved, it is here understood as the optimal combination of learning and online presence, enhancing the potential benefits of both approaches (Graham, Allen & Ure, 2003), thus becoming a suitable approach to introduce innovation and international added value for international teacher-educators (Carlsen, Holmberg, Neghina & Owusu-Boampong, 2016; Naylor & Gibbs, 2018). It emphasizes a participant-centered perspective, facilitates access to continuing education for new audiences and the better use of educational resources, therefore rethinking the teaching model to adapt them to the specific context. Moreover, a recent review of the literature evidence that BL appears to facilitate learner empowerment more than either face-to-face or fully online courses, with a greater chance of succeeding (Owston, 2018). This condition is valuable if we consider a thoughtful duration

(Consuegra & Engels, 2016), the need for professional and peer support (Desimone & Garet, 2015), active learning (Consuegra & Engels, 2016), link and relevance between theory and practice (Wilson, 2012) and the implications for professional identity (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011).

Despite the variety of potential described above, the adoption of BL for cross-international teacher-educator training is still in its starting phase. In their review about global BL, Spring and Graham (2017) demonstrated that in educational literature there exists a lack of connection between countries and regions. However, BL could be an interesting choice in developing countries looking for flexible and effective solutions to adapt to a challenging context with limited technological solutions. Indeed, BL is based on a non-expensive technical infrastructure, such as a free online learning environment like Moodle, that is already rich in online tutorials in different languages and is well adapted for mobile. Indeed, in BL what really matters is to have a vision of educational technologies, which should be fully integrated into the psycho-pedagogical models.

### **Blended Learning in the Global South: Focus on Pakistan**

In Pakistan, the quality of teacher education still needs improvement through the introduction of innovative strategies and practices, together with economic and social recognition (Dilshad, Rehman, Ahmad & Iqbal, 2010) and new accreditation procedures (Mirza, 2005). The government's budget for education is still very low, especially when compared with the 20% recommended by UNICEF and the 6% agreed upon in the Dakar Framework of Action at the 2000 World Educational Forum.

Pakistan's National Education Policy (1998–2010) observed “the qualitative dimension of the teacher training program has received marginal attention resulting in mass production of teachers with a shallow understanding of both the content and methodology of education” (Government of Pakistan, 1998). Numerous factors affect the low performance and quality of teachers in Pakistan, which include, absence of academic qualification, of continuous professional development and of recruitment on merit. New Teacher Induction Policy 2017 is the most recent education reforms. Right after this reform, the government advertised recruitment of more than 17000 teachers of various cadres and scales with no requisite condition of professional qualification for any post. Indeed, as Halai, Begum, Niaz, Hussain and Baig (2018) stress, education in general and teachers in particular, are mostly influenced by governing political parties.

About teacher-educators' professional developing some practices are supported by the specific national association, in particular about reflexive practices (Khamis & Sammons, 2004). The success of some professional learning initiative stressed the importance of field-based rather than university-based programmes, with still a limited impact on whole school development. From the results of the research analysis done by Khamis and Sammons (2004), factors involved in hindering the development of the role of teacher educators in the context of schools in Pakistan include: role ambiguity and competition for the available human resource; efforts of the teacher educator not viewed as a priority by school management; self-perception of the teacher educator as an expert and not ‘just a teacher’; initial intensity and demands placed upon teacher educators to initiate, plan, and support improvement efforts without the requisite assistance or support; lack of a school vision leading to lack of support from management and system inertia. Considering all these factors, the educational system disregards the teacher educator's professional skills.

In the so-called Global South, the training is increasingly dematerialized in online courses recognized as a viable alternative instructional delivery method in higher education (for a review of BL in Asia, see Tham & Tham, 2013). Also in Pakistan, growing attention has recently been paid to the opportunities created by technology and their implications for economic and social growth. In the rural and urban areas of Pakistan, social network platforms are frequently used, as there is easy access to high-

speed Internet and mobile broadband – like 3G and 4G Long-Term Evolution LTE. For teachers and teacher-educators, the integrating technology or e-learning facilities are still in their beginning stages (Bashiruddin, 2011). Social media has influenced the performance of teachers in developing countries like Pakistan. However, teachers face challenges regarding the use of technology in the teaching process; these barriers are mostly related to the training of teachers, support and lack of awareness about the technical skills needed to fully utilize these technologies (Hassan & Sajid, 2012).

## The Case Study

### *Research question*

This study sought to answer the following question: What are the main competences developed by Pakistani teacher-educators involved in an international blended course? For this reason, we analyze the professional learning of Pakistani teacher-educators that attended an international blended course between Europe and Asia. In the next section, the formative project is briefly presented.

### *The programme: Teacher-educators between Europe and Asia*

This section aims to present the formative project on which the blended course was conceived and supported, to give an overview of the international dimension of the training proposed to the Pakistani teacher-educators.

The “*Blended Learning Training for Teachers educators*” project (hereafter “BLTeae”) – for more information, see <http://blteae.eu/> – led by Aix-Marseille University (France) is supported by the European Capacity Building Programme. This European programme has the aim of fostering and increasing trans-national cooperation projects between higher education institutions, addressing challenges and cross-cultural awareness. The BLTeae project is oriented to European countries (France, Belgium, Denmark, and Estonia) and Asian countries (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan) in a collaborative community capable of reflecting on teaching trainers’ practices. It responds to the common European and Asiatic issue of improving and revising teacher training programmes. Indeed, improving the quality of teacher training effectiveness is one important school-related factor affecting student achievement in different regions (see OECD, 2014). The BLTeae project was delivered across three years (2017–2019):

- 1) In the first year, an initial questionnaire was conceived and submitted to the community to understand the needs and skills of teacher educators. At the same time, all the institutions were involved in co-developing content for a training course organized with 20 online modular courses (of which three developed by Pakistan partner) and two face-to-face training sessions (one host in Bangladesh and the second in Pakistan);
- 2) In the second year, all the members were involved in video sharing their teaching practices (related to the modules) and an online community discussion about the teachers’ practices;
- 3) In the third year, the main activity was the sharing of best practices of teacher-educators to build a common reference curriculum for teacher-educators.

BL is proposed considering the three macro levels: ‘personal’, ‘peer’ and ‘group’. The personal dimension of teacher-educators in the project is supported by the use of ePortfolios for individual reflection. The peers share in the community what they have learned by using the online resources and later re-evaluate these experiences to see them in new ways that might suggest new practices. In particular, the role of the peers is being active in the sharing of digital video about their teaching practices (Santagata & Angelici, 2010). Indirectly, this online activity could elicit an impact on their local

teaching class and, more widely, in the educational community. Learning innovative practices, the embedded use of educational technology in the training course and continue discussing knowledge and personal experiences on a common space could strengthen effective teaching

Additionally, the international dimension in the project between the partners makes possible the sharing and critical discussion of common topics and visualization of the links to the local educational context. Teachers are sensitized to the use of adequate and clear communication for the international community using the common language of English; moreover, they critically consider the perspective (for example, the pedagogies of the flipped classroom) of local situations. The international cooperation enriches teachers' practices, facilitating a critical comparison and the sharing of reflections.

Finally, the BLTeae project has a special focus on the design of shared and concrete objectives through the mediation of technologies. Indeed, the BLTeae project proposes the teacher-educators improve teacher practices by joining in common discussions finalized to a shared and joint curriculum. This way, each participant can discover and explore the potentiality of ITC (Moodle, social networks, etc.) for the growing of the collective reflective community.

### ***Participation and Data***

In this paper, we focus on Pakistani Teacher-educators group. In Pakistan, Teacher-educators are considered Faculty member involved in the teacher training. They can have a doctoral level and more usually a master degree. Also, doctoral students are involved in teacher training too, working as teacher assisting. To collect data, we adopt the blended ethnography, as a form of ethnography that integrates techniques of traditional face-to-face research with those of virtual ethnography, such as participant observation and face-to-face interviews (Hammersley, 2006). This gives participants a direct voice (Hine, 2000) to obtain better completeness of data (Miller & Slater, 2000). The analysis was carried out starting from three main sources:

- traces are written in the online platform by Pakistani teacher-educators;
- 47 questionnaires at the end of the face-to-face training sessions in Pakistan (35 by a woman and 12 men). The questionnaire was composed of closed and open questions. The closed questions were about the agreement of some items, where 80% strongly agreed with the engagement, the relevance of the topics and the quality and structure of the content. 20% of participants complained about the logistics needed (there was no computer available in the room for the participants) and said that the session time was too short (20 minutes on average for each session);
- 10 deep-interviews with Pakistani educators carried out in Pakistan (8 women and 2 men).

The written traces, the open questions, and the deep-interviews were qualitatively analyzed. The three datasets were analyzed in a triangulation perspective. All the data were read by two researchers, and a thematic and content analysis was done (Charmaz, 2006; Neuendorf, 2016) in a grounded approach.

## **Results**

### ***Developing Technological Skills***

Generally, teacher-educators appreciated the practical competencies developed, in particular, the skills related to how to use social media in teaching, how to do video-clips and how to use their ePortfolio. These three aspects are considered to be fairly new topics in their repertoire. Teacher-educators were

interested in understanding the functionality and utility of recent technology: “I have used YouTube video clips, video lectures, feature films, and WhatsApp during class. I have just started using Google Classroom to incorporate eLearning. I plan to incorporate Google Forms in [the] classroom for formative assessment[s]”. Also, teachers appreciated best practices that can be quickly adapted to their context.

Pakistani teacher-educators involved in the project had positive attitudes toward the use of technology in teaching (“I [have integrated] technology in teaching since 2008. I have observed that students are fully involved in learning when we integrate technology”), using a variety of tools (“Generally I use video clips from YouTube, and TeacherTube. I share video clips through [my] WhatsApp group and assign students’ tasks for future [classes]”). Laptops, desktops, mobile phones, and tablets have been used for Internet surfing & searching, as well as for preparing presentations and watching videos, with growing attention to social networks.

### ***Developing Pedagogical and Instructional Design skills***

Furthermore, teachers’ attention is centered on the use of ePortfolios (“I will develop the ePortfolio of my students and their teaching practices as they [have] already [developed] it manually”), videos and social media to teach (“To use Facebook as a platform”).

Teacher-educators are interested in BL, which they discovered through their participation in the project, which proposes an online platform and face-to-face meetings with an international audience or at national events. Consequently, they propose using BL in classrooms (“I will try to follow [the] BLT methodology in my training”), adopted in their practices:

“I have tried blending mediums with [lectures] and discussion methods. The students are better able to attempt analysis questions after watching a video clip and discussion. They are motivated and explore other sources on the topic on their own. They also share their learning with [their classmates] afterward”.

BL is interpreted as a suitable and equilibrate introduction of technology in the classroom, with a good integration of activities with both technology and paper:

“If the students watch a movie of [a] video lecture, they are given a small questionnaire [in which] to express their opinion about the content, as well as the concepts discussed. This activity can be for individuals or in [the] think-pair-share methodology”.

This teacher, for example, exposes his use of BL:

“I observe that [the] concept of blended learning carries [a] contextual meaning. In our scenario, we as teachers [blend] technology in teaching through certain ways, like showing video [clips] relating to certain concepts that we have to teach, using multimedia [projects] for teaching through using PowerPoint slides, sending important electronic material through emails, receiving assignments of students through emails, sharing important electronic material and relevant videos with students through WhatsApp”.

This broad interpretation of BL is linked to the contextual resources and the novelty of the concept (“Careful planning is needed in blending as it is still a new concept in Pakistan”), stressing the role of preparing the lesson with the use of technology:

“Blending needs careful planning and monitoring. Some students, although users of social media, are more into leisure activities and have to be guided in [their] use of technology. Some students take it lightly so they have to be motivated”.

The introduction of technology in learning has some rapid advantages, such as leading to more active student participation (“Student classroom participation increased. Absenteeism [lessened] and they started to work enthusiastically on the given online assignments. They became more open in giving their opinions and participating in discussions”), motivating the teacher-educators to continue to use it.

### ***Developing Interpersonal and Intercultural skills***

Thanks to these experiences, teacher-educators became more aware of the introduction of more cultural and social aspects in the instructional design of their lesson, valorizing the interactive side. Indeed, all teachers appreciated the sharing with international trainers and participants (“[It is] good to share and exchange ideas, good practices, challenges and situations”, “Exposure to international perspective[s] [and] learning from each other [facilitates] future collaboration”). Indeed, from face-to-face training, they have had the opportunity to spend time with international participants, sharing formal and informal time together (“Yes, get to know their culture, personal life, hobbies and personal experiences in different subject areas”; “Yes, I enjoy [the] exchange as they [clarify] those concepts which I could not ask during session”; “Increases cultural awareness [and] build[s] good relationship[s]”; “Because different cultures have different taste of customs”). The motivation to appreciate the international exchange allows them to appreciate experiences across the globe (“To know ... the new technique[s] in teaching internationally, we learn many things directly related to their culture”; “It is important. It encourages the authority to provide and arrange more training sessions for us”). Generally, teachers express the value of the international exchange, stressing the need for more sessions, including informal ones (“Provide social trip[s] to know the participants better”). The international confrontation also helps to increase motivation in the challenge to renew their teaching practices, as expressed by the teacher-educators:

“The training (4 days) has not only provided [us] with knowledge and skills in blended learning but also [brings] together with the teaching community from many countries. It has allowed [us to] share common goal[s], common difficulties and common reflection[s] which will help each institution to move forward. The sharing of issues and problem[s] face[d] by different [teachers] was really helpful for me as I learn[ed] almost all people have to face challenges and I should not give up implement[ing] new trends”.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study show the engagement and the willing of the teacher-educators about their professional learning, despite the difficult working conditions as of educational system in Pakistan. This international engagement has given them the opportunity to develop and consoled technological skills; pedagogical and instructional design skills; interpersonal and intercultural skills. All these skills could directly improve and increase the quality of teacher training. Teacher educators in Pakistan, therefore, need to seize the opportunities of international formations in order to make up for the limits of the national system. In the same time, they need to be supported in how to implement innovation and new practices in the local context. Indeed, as shown by Ali (2018) pedagogical changes through teachers cannot be effective without addressing critical aspects of the classroom and school structure and culture, improving working conditions like basic facilities and structural resources.

At the same time, it is also important to focus on the quality of the design of appropriate international training, which take into account the possible limits and challenges of the context. The design of innovative learning courses, like BL or MOOC, is strategic for today's international globalization. BL is based on international collaborative learning and can be particularly useful in designing interventions, with a scenario that includes social interaction, open and complex issues requiring investigation and active engagement and shared knowledge objects and collective efforts to advance knowledge. It becomes interesting to reflect on its benefits and challenges (King, Luan & Lopes, 2018) and how the students will transfer the skills of reflection tested during the online course in their future professional life. Furthermore, the online learning environment could be a boundary between the formative and the professional dimensions. Certainly, the adoption of BL is not easy to implement nor is it able to guarantee satisfactory results.

In an international BL design, collaboration is particularly important for the learning community. Indeed, the adoption of technology for collaborative learning situations include mainly knowledge creation; public sharing of practices and opportunities for continue and guided reflections about local practices and international innovations and trends, which need to be adapted and changed. Also, the collaborative design of BL for teacher educators have to stress the planning of activities around shared objectives on which the teacher educator have to feel responsible, with a strong local impact. In this way, creativity and reflections are engaged in a long term process of professional developing, open across local and international communities and institutions, supported by flexible tools adapted to, often, limited technological resources.

Finally, if well designed, BL from an international perspective could be a space in which to improve professional competence and transversal skills, subsequently improving reflective and intercultural skills, considering that learners have to deal with complex, ill-defined working contexts (like periods of uncertainty and transition) in their personal and professional lives (Lakkala, Toom, Ilomäki & Muukkonen, 2015). Thus, the design of a BL course could help to support a new generation of international teachers who are connected beyond national borders.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we considered the development of complex professionalism such as that of the teacher-educators and how this can allow participants to take advantage of international networking, which today technology makes possible but is not yet fully proposed by higher institutions. Indeed, as stressed by Kelchtermans, Smith and Vanderlinde (2018) "there is a need to raise awareness of the different and distinctive national and institutional contexts teacher educators are working in and how they affect their practices as well as their opportunities to develop professionally" (p.10). Quality of teacher-educators training in different parts of the world – and in this case Pakistan - could take advantages by a continuous connection between people, knowledge, and communities, opening new space of discussions and valorising contextual educational experiences outside of the occidental mainstreaming in teaching and learning.

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