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Supporting teacher educators: Insights from the British Council's work

By Daniel Xerri, Malta and Simon Borg, Slovenia

Introduction

While in recent years the attention given to the professional development of language teachers has been substantial, comparable work focusing on the development of teacher educators has been limited. In fact, the latter have been called "an under-researched, poorly understood and ill-defined occupational group" (Murray, 2016, p. 35). In many contexts, policy makers fail to acknowledge that teacher educators are a distinct group of professionals that have their own induction and professional development needs (Swennen & van der Klink, 2009). The problem is compounded by the broad definition of the term *teacher educator*, which encompasses a wide variety of roles and positions that involve supporting teachers. For instance, the European Commission (2013) states that "Teacher Educators are all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of student teachers and teachers" (p. 8). While this definition includes university-based teacher educators, school-based mentors, freelance teacher trainers and a range of other professionals, very few countries have standards determining the competences that a person requires to work as a teacher educator (European Commission, 2012). Particularly in ELT, many teacher educators are experienced practitioners who work simultaneously as language teachers in schools. This helps engender the assumption that the needs of teacher educators are identical to those of the professionals they support, when in truth they might be quite different (Hadar & Brody, 2018).

What competences do teacher educators need?

Establishing the competences that teacher educators require helps to delineate what the role involves and how distinct its associated needs are from those of language teachers. When understood as the knowledge, skills and attitudes that individuals require in their professional context, competences are what enable teacher educators to operate effectively. In ELT, one analysis of these competences is the British Council's (2022a) *Continuing professional development framework*

for teacher educators. The framework (see also Darling, 2022) describes eleven professional practices organised into three categories: knowledge, skills, and approaches to development.

Figure 1: CPD Framework for Teacher Educators

In terms of the knowledge category, being an effective teacher educator involves knowing the subject, as well as understanding the educational context and how teachers learn. Some of the subject knowledge entailed includes having an appropriate level of proficiency in English, solid language awareness, and a good understanding of teaching methodology and assessment. Teacher educators' work can also be enhanced by an understanding of the socio-cultural context and education system teachers work in. Similarly, knowledge of how teachers acquire and use new knowledge and of how their attitudes, beliefs and motivations influence professional learning also allow teacher educators to operate more effectively.

With respect to the skills category, the framework identifies six professional practices that effective teacher educators engage in. These include both planning and managing teacher learning, which amongst other things, involve the

ability to use needs analysis, formulate learning objectives, and model effective teaching. The ability to evaluate teacher competence includes both knowing how to assess teacher learning as well as giving teachers effective oral and written feedback. Teacher educators also need to know how to support teachers' ongoing professional development (by, for example, making them aware of the importance of CPD). The fifth professional practice in this group is adopting inclusive practices, a key educational concern that allows teacher educators to create a learning environment that is equitable, open and respectful. The last item in the skills category of teacher educator competences is the ability to support remote learning, which can be achieved through the deployment of different learning channels and the effective integration of technology.

The final domain in the British Council's CPD framework for teacher educators includes two professional practices. The first one involves taking responsibility for one's professional development, which can be achieved, for example, when teacher educators adopt a positive attitude towards regular reflection and feedback and keep abreast of developments in the field. The second professional practice consists of teacher educators' ability to contribute to the profession, which involves such competences as creating and supporting teacher communities of practices, disseminating information about their own practices and experiences to their peers, and conducting research that is relevant to them and other professionals.

While the professional practices in the framework are of wide relevance, certain competences will be of particular importance for specific teacher educator roles. For example, "supporting remote learning" is particularly important for online teacher educators, while "evaluating teacher competence" addresses the skills and knowledge required by teacher educators who observe teachers and give them feedback. The framework is not a recipe but a broad tool which can be used flexibly to support key teacher educator needs in different contexts.

Why is support for teacher educators' competences important?

The British Council framework discussed above not only identifies which professional practices teacher educators require; it also defines four developmental stages (foundation, engagement, integration and specialisation) through which teacher educator competences develop[1]. However, for individuals to progress through these stages, they require support, which can be in the form of both self-directed resources as well as more structured professional guidance (for example, training courses). However, in many contexts around the world support for teacher educators is not always easily accessible (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). The assumption often is that skilled teachers will be able to make a rather seamless transition to being a teacher educator or that the acquisition of higher academic qualifications automatically positions an individual to be an effective teacher educator.

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[1] The British Council provides a self-assessment tool – the TESAT – which teacher educators can complete in order to reflect on their current developmental level.

One of the reasons why teacher educators struggle to receive support for the development of their competences is that in certain countries the role is not yet recognised as a fully-fledged profession (Ping et al., 2018). The absence of a formal route leading one to become a teacher educator means that many language teachers transition into the role without sufficient preparation for the challenges it presents or having mastered the duties and responsibilities associated with this new professional identity (Murray & Male, 2005; Williams & Hayler, 2016). This results in teacher educators doing most of their learning on the job via experimentation or through discussions with their peers (Swennen et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2012).

Given, as already noted, that teacher educators are a heterogeneous group, (Ping et al., 2018), the developmental support they receive needs to be correspondingly diverse. In fact, it might be more appropriate to talk of several roles fulfilled by different types of teacher educators (la Velle, 2023), each requiring its own specialised kind of support. It is not only necessary, then, for educational systems to provide support for teacher educators, but to ensure this is aligned with the roles they play in those systems (Lunenberg et al., 2014).

How is the British Council supporting teacher educators?

Teacher educators are key to the delivery of British Council CPD programmes worldwide and specific country-based projects will often provide preparatory training for teacher educators. For example, large-scale CPD initiatives for teachers of English in Egypt provide training that familiarizes teacher educators with programme content and seeks to develop specific competences (for example, how to support teachers online became a central focus of teacher educator training during the pandemic). Beyond such programme-specific examples, though, the British Council also provides a broader Teacher Educator Support Programme (TEDSP), which aims to support individuals with their professional and career development irrespective of the role or setting they may work in (British Council, n.d.). TEDSP acknowledges that teacher educators fulfil different roles (some of these are listed on the British Council's landing page for teacher educators), and seeks to offer a wide range of activities that cater for the needs associated with these roles.

TEACHER EDUCATOR NETWORK
(Global Resources)
Newsletters
Webinars
Self-Directed Pathway Builder
MOOC

TEACHER EDUCATOR COMMUNITY
(Community Resources)
Training courses
Small group collaborative opportunities
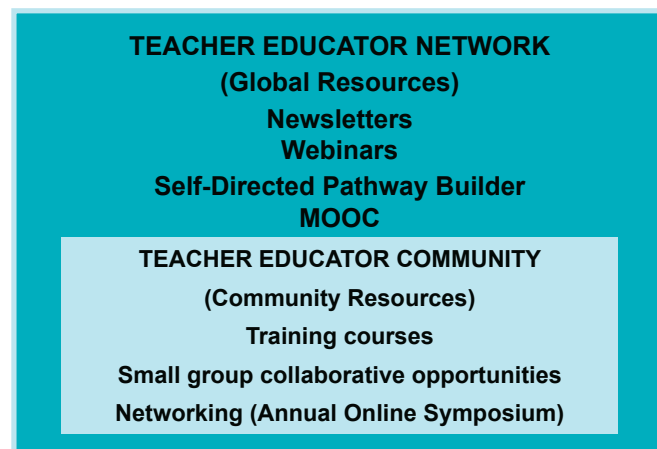**Networking (Annual Online Symposium)**

Figure 2: TEDSP dimensions and activities

As Figure 2 shows, the British Council's TEDSP operates at both a global level (the wider teacher educator network which includes around 30,000 newsletter subscribers) and through smaller-scale and teacher educator community activities in a small number of priority countries). Hence, while the network consists of a large population of thousands of teacher educators globally who the British Council is seeking to engage through open access resources, the community includes a much smaller target audience of teacher educators who engage more deeply with the TEDSP through resources that are not open access and can be more formally structured. Community support for teacher educators is also designed to be integrated into British Council country-based programming (thus, they can also be part of the kind of programme-specific teacher educator support mentioned above).

While the network activities consist of information that teacher educators can engage with in an autonomous manner, the community activities comprise courses, events and engagement models that are based on the principle of collaborative learning under the guidance of an experienced engagement lead. The different activities forming part of the network and community dimensions of the TEDSP are described in Table 1 (see the Teacher Educator landing page for further details).

Table 1: TEDSP activities

Activity	Network	Community	Description
Newsletters	✓		A monthly e-mail newsletter that teacher educators subscribe to. It includes information about upcoming British Council events and relevant resources.
Webinars	✓		Monthly webinars on a range of topics relevant to the professional development of teacher educators.
Self-Directed Pathway Builder	✓		A learning pathway that teacher educators can construct for themselves by following the steps on the TeachingEnglish website. This pathway involves using the CPD Framework for teacher educators, the Teacher Educator Self-assessment Tool, the TESAT profile chart, and a list of curated resources.
MOOC *Helping Teachers to Learn* (forthcoming)	✓		A 9-week course with set start and end dates that is aimed at teacher educators and teachers transitioning into the role of teacher educator. The course focuses on the foundations that teacher educators require to facilitate teacher learning.
Assured Certificate in Teacher Education (ACTE)		✓	A 50-hour course accredited by City and Guilds. It targets teacher educators interested in developing their knowledge and skills, as well as teachers keen on transitioning into the role of a teacher educator.
Community of Practice Leader Support Programme		✓	A 40-hour online course that acts as a form of introductory training for professionals interested in developing the knowledge and skills to set up and facilitate communities of practice for teachers.
Learning Pathways into the Assured Certificate in Teacher Education (LPACTE)		✓	A 10-week online mentored course that provides participants with preparation for ACTE by acting as an initial grounding in the knowledge, skills and self-awareness associated with the role of a teacher educator.
Supported Pathway Builder		✓	A series of meetings and group activities over an 8-week period by means of which participants receive support to build their learning pathway. The moderated pathway builder helps teacher educators to develop professionally in a safe and supportive environment.
Collaborative Outputs		✓	Practical resources produced by the communities of practice working collaboratively in the community space on the British Council's learning management system and under the guidance of an Engagement Lead.
Annual Teacher Educator Community Online Symposium		✓	A one-day event that provides community members with an opportunity to network, as well as to reflect and discuss activities, collaborative outputs and themes pertinent to the work of a teacher educator. The event is meant to bring together teacher educators from the British Council's small communities of practice, Engagement Leads, and British Council colleagues.

Challenges for a global language teacher educators' support programm

The pilot year of the British Council's TEDSP recently underwent a detailed strategic review (Borg & Xerri, 2023) which has highlighted some of the challenges that the organisation faces in supporting a global community of teacher educators. One of these relates to the point made above about the many kinds of teacher educators that exist. The programme's vision is to provide teacher educators with "a vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, gender-sensitive and professionalised teacher educator network and community, relevant to teacher educators operating in different settings" (British Council, 2022b), but it is clearly very difficult to provide support that addresses the needs of every kind of teacher educator. The British Council recognises this challenge, and while it seeks to support language teacher educators generally, it does define its audience more specifically as "individual teacher educators who have a formal defined in-service role in supporting teachers to develop professionally and are involved in British Council country-based programming – as beneficiary and/or as an integrated part of programme delivery" (British Council, 2023).

Another significant challenge that the British Council faces in delivering TEDSP is that created by the tension between its aspirations for teacher educators and the contextual realities in which they operate. This is particularly so where the British Council seeks to promote self-directed, open-ended and self-sustaining teacher educator communities in contexts with educational traditions with contrasting values[2]. Even at the level of the global teacher educator network, while TEDSP makes available self-study resources that teacher educators can engage with independently, the educational culture in many contexts is such that professional development of this kind can be less valued than a formal training course. The tensions that arise here between the kinds of teacher educator support the British Council would like to promote and what teacher educators in various contexts are ready for is summarised in Figure 3. As TEDSP evolves, finding ways of addressing such tensions will be important for the effectiveness of the British Council's teacher educator support.
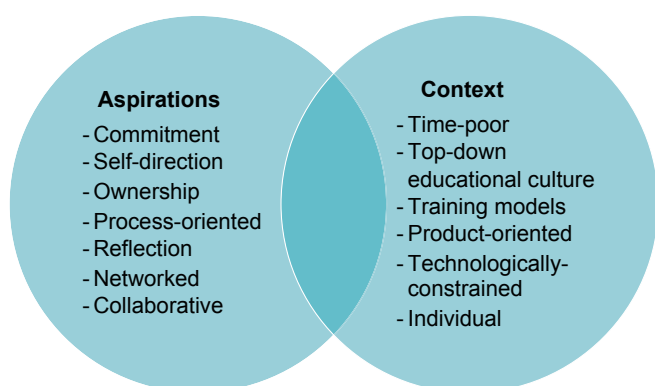
Figure 3: Aspirations and context in small-group teacher educator communities

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2   In such cases, teacher educators do also have access to more formal, structured and time-bound learning pathways.

One final issue highlighted in the review of TEDSP that can be noted here is how it monitors its impact. There are substantial difficulties in monitoring how thousands of teacher educators are engaging with a wide range of developmental resources (formally delivered and self-access), and for some it may be difficult to go beyond evidence based on analytics (such as how many people read newsletters). However, with the more targeted events, such as webinars and small-group teacher educator communities of practice, there is scope (which the British Council is already addressing and which will become more salient as the programme grows and core TEDSP team's capacity for evaluation work increases) for approaches to evaluation that focus not only on metrics but also on what difference TEDSP activities make to the subsequent teacher educator practices of participants. In its first full year of activity, TEDSP has necessarily focused on getting things done; developing a robust evaluation framework, though, will be an important task during its second year.

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