

Lifelong Learning: Is It in the Future Plans of Candidate Teachers?

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Abstract

Teacher education today has taken a new significance since meeting the needs and demands of the changing societies has already become a real educational challenge. The present educational settings welcome the teachers who can go beyond the formal schooling period by taking their own learning responsibilities for professional growth and development. In addition to the individual determination and attempt which is essential for this process, inspiring and empowering teachers and teacher candidates to become life long learners must be an academic and institutional objective of teacher educators, other educational bodies and policy makers both in national and international contexts. Turkish Ministry of National Education has seen lifelong learning as a driving force for creating a better society. In this sense, for teacher educators, it is a contemporary necessity to set up an agenda for helping candidate teachers recognize the importance of lifelong learning, in other words, continuing professional development. This qualitative study has tried to find out the professional development plans of the candidates in the Department of English Language Teaching at Mersin University. For data collection, the participants have been asked open-ended questions on their understanding of lifelong learning, their interest in professional development and their plans as future teachers. The results obtained suggest a number of implications and insights for the teacher educators.

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is a contemporary concept which attracts the attention of both governments and individuals in today's world, however, what the term explains has been valued for ages and expressed with different names or phrases in almost all societies to praise the importance of ongoing learning. With the impact of the recent technological revolution and the need for renewing human capital, lifelong learning has already become a hot issue discussed in national and international contexts.

European Council, the body responsible for setting European Union goals and priorities, has put a special emphasis on lifelong learning as it is accepted as a driving force for better life standards in the future [1]. By accelerating the lifelong learning activities, it has been aimed to respond to the contemporary challenges such as the drastic technological changes and the increasing needs of modern society. With the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning [2], it has been stated that lifelong learning must become the guiding principle and it is beyond the limits of education and training.

In line with European Union's emphasis on lifelong learning, Turkey, as a candidate country, has also seen lifelong learning as a solution to the current and future needs of the society. According to Turkey National Lifelong Learning Strategy Paper 2014-2018, The Ministry of Education has been putting the strategies into practice, and offering a lot of programs which increase access to lifelong learning activities. The ultimate aim is to suggest the flexible ways of learning for personal and professional development.

One of the main components of lifelong learning is professional development. Today's professionals are expected to determine their existing knowledge and skills and take actions for their absent professional skills in order to have better employment opportunities. Teaching in this context, deserves high priority since education is involved in every aspect of life. Teaching has been viewed as a profession that requires lifelong learning and professional development, which is a voluntary, ongoing, and bottom-up process [3] [4].

As a consequence of the above mentioned changes and developments, the present educational settings welcome the teachers who can go beyond the formal schooling period by taking their own responsibilities for professional growth and development. They are expected to raise awareness about lifelong learning and to know what, why and how to learn for their personal and professional empowerment. In this process, inspiring and encouraging teachers and teacher candidates is a necessity for policy makers, ministry experts, school administrators and teacher educators. Setting up an agenda for their awareness raising activities in which they can be involved can make great contribution to the whole issue.

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The present study aims to find out the teacher candidates' understanding of lifelong learning and their plans for professional development and hence to learn more about what should be considered while helping teacher candidates prepare for their future career.

2. Methodology

This study is a qualitative one which was carried out to understand the English language teacher candidates' attributions of lifelong learning and professional development, and their plans for future. Through qualitative research, the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants [5]. In this sense, qualitative research design is a way to learn more about how and why individuals perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret and interact [6].

36 teacher candidates in the Department of English Language Teaching, The Faculty of Education at Mersin University participated in the study. The candidates are in their last year of initial teacher education and are expected to work as professionals in the following year. As the requirement of their practicum, they have already started to teach in real classrooms and become familiar with the basics of teaching for two terms. For data collection, the participants were asked two open-ended questions which they can answer with their own terms relying on their own values, opinions and experiences.

1. What is your understanding of lifelong learning and professional development?
2. What are your future plans for lifelong learning and professional development?

In order to analyze data, content analysis was done since it is the systematic way of understanding the concepts and themes emerged from the participants' answers. As the answers to both questions had a great diversity, for Question 1, the first step was to identify the main codes arisen. In the second step, the recurred codes were categorized and finally it was tried to highlight the themes emerged. For Question 2, their future plans were listed.

3. Findings and Discussion

Question 1 was asked to understand what lifelong learning and professional development meant for the candidates. Their answers were put into two groups although most of their explanations on lifelong learning and professional development have slight differences. Table 1 shows the codes arisen from the candidates' statements.



Table 1.
Lifelong Learning- Professional Development

Codes for lifelong learning	Categories	Theme
1. voluntary, at any age, informal/not schooling, interest/need-based [13]		
2. renewing self, self-actualization, self-enrichment, being better person/ citizen [11]	Personal growth Personal and professional growth	Willingness for ongoing learning Willingness for ongoing learning
3. opening to learn, keeping up with the modern time, being 21 st century citizen, adaptation to knowledge-based society [9]		
4. not satisfied with professional knowledge & skills [3]		
Codes for professional development		
1. part of lifelong learning/open to learn [17]		
2. avoid fossilization/keep up with the time/ use opportunities offered by technology [16]		
3. job satisfaction [3]		

36 % of the candidates think that lifelong learning with its informal nature is a voluntary activity done at any age. It is usually interest and sometimes need-based.

"There is no age boundary. You can learn anything at any age"

"Nobody forces you to learn, you choose what to learn, which is great".

"You take your own responsibility for learning something you are interested".

According to 31 % of them, lifelong learning is renewing self or self-actualization.

"It is self-actualization. You can discover your full potential".

"Lifelong learning makes us maximize our knowledge and skills, and helps us become better people".

"It is enriching yourself with different activities you choose to do".

"Lifelong learning makes you active, skillful and optimist citizen".

"To me, it is discovering life, not putting yourself within the limits of a profession".

"It is learning from cradle to grave"

25 % of the candidates emphasize that lifelong learning is essential for keeping up with the time and hence being 21st century citizen.

"We live in a constantly changing world and must catch up the changes around us".

"Technology facilitates our personal development bringing the world to our home".

3 of the candidates (8 %) think that a person cannot be satisfied with only professional knowledge and skills.

"I will be doing different things along with teaching English, so I must acquire new skills to accommodate myself to the changing world".

For professional development, almost half of the candidates (47 %) think that it is part of lifelong learning. Also, it is being open to learn which is necessary for the profession.

"I believe that all sorts of professional development activities are part of lifelong learning, because you constantly renew yourself and this makes a difference in your life".

"All professional development activities make contribution to your personal growth".

According to 44% of the candidates, professional development means avoiding fossilization and keeping up with the age of technology.

"I have learned a lot here, but I know that I will go on learning to teach more efficiently".

"I do not want to be an old-fashioned teacher who does the same kind of things on and on".

3 of the candidates (8%) state that professional development causes job satisfaction.

“If I upgrade my knowledge and skills as a teacher, I can help my students learn more, and this gives me pleasure and satisfaction”.

“Professional growth gives you job satisfaction”.

These expressions coded above may indicate that the candidates have already developed an understanding on what lifelong learning is and what contributions it makes to one’s life. “Learning outside school” and “learning at any age and at any setting” points out the flexible nature of lifelong learning. The candidates see lifelong learning is a process of self-enrichment which leads to being a happy and active citizen. Also, “keeping up with the time” may refer to the necessity they feel to use the opportunities offered by the recent scientific developments and technological advancements. According to their views, lifelong learning includes and necessitates professional development.

The second question was about their future plans regarding lifelong learning and professional development. Their lifelong plans listed below include a variety of alternatives:

- Learning another language (one of the European languages and Chinese)
- Doing voluntary work in nongovernmental organizations in Turkey, or being a volunteer teacher for the students in need
- Having a voluntary job abroad (for instance, in an Asian country where children and women are in need)
- Travelling, being a cultural traveler, that is, travelling to learn
- Joining singing, dancing clubs.
- Attending craft courses
- Participating in courses which foster professional competence
- Taking part in international projects

Their plans for professional development are seen in different groups:

1. Participation in conferences, seminars, workshops, and courses depending on their teaching needs.
2. Participation in in-service teacher training courses organized by Ministry of Education.
3. Doing post-graduate study in English Language Teaching or in Educational Sciences
4. Taking part in European Union projects on education, particularly initiating Comenius projects at schools as they think that such a collaboration will broaden their horizon.
5. Attending professional courses abroad and getting internationally accepted teaching certificates.
6. Being a student in distance-education and studying another subject.
7. Visiting useful web-sites and blogs, and sharing and exchanging ideas and experience with colleagues all over the world, having a web-site run by a group of colleagues.
8. Becoming a blog writer.

The future plans of the candidates outlined above may indicate that they are willing to set up a developmental agenda for their personal and professional growth.

4. Conclusion

This study may reveal that English language teacher candidates at Mersin University are aware of empowering role of lifelong learning and professional development. They think that they can acquire fundamental skills needed for 21st century citizenship through lifelong learning. Lifelong learning including innovation in learning and teaching is seen a way of raising their life standards. Thus, it can be said that they have a positive understanding about lifelong learning. Moreover, their agenda with different lifelong learning and professional development activities may indicate their willingness for personal and professional growth.

Teacher educators, in this context, can reconsider the courses given to particularly third and fourth year students and add new components focusing on the issue to help them deepen their understanding. Organizing extra-curricular activities which give guidance and counselling to the candidates can make contribution to address their lifelong awareness. As a consequence, it can be said that lifelong learning is in the future plans of teacher candidates.

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