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School-university Partnerships in Teacher Education: Tension Between Partners and How They Handle It

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Abstract

Myanmar, a country of developing status, is facing many challenges in reforming its education system. This article investigates the current practices of school-university partnerships from the perspective of student teachers and mentor teachers in Myanmar, where there is an ongoing process of teacher education reform. The aim of this article is to investigate the practices of school-university partnerships and the tension between partners in the training of pre-service teachers within the context of teacher education. A qualitative research method is applied in this study where six candidates were interviewed individually. Participants include three student teachers from educational universities and three mentor teachers from basic education high schools in Myanmar. The results showed that, except for student teachers' practice teaching, there is no intensive collaboration between schools and universities. Trust is a major problem between student teachers and mentor teachers. Different opinions and perspectives towards teaching and learning are also causing tension between partners. Although there is tension between mentor teachers and student teachers, they handle this through alternative collaboration activities and negotiation between partners.

Keywords: Myanmar education reform, school-university partnerships, teacher education

1. Introduction

Compared to the past, the demands of society on education are increasing gradually around the world during this century. According to Hargreaves (1999), the expectation of politicians, parents and employers on the achievements of students have been rising and this leads to new needs for professional knowledge creation in education. The need to update professional knowledge has become a major theme in many areas, including teaching, teacher education and teacher knowledge creation (Hargreaves, 1999).

Where there is a need for professional knowledge, there is a call for collaboration. Especially in the area of teacher education where there is a need to strengthen the connection between research, innovation and practice, collaboration cannot be neglected (Halasz, 2016). As a tool to connect these three poles, teacher collaboration has become the keystone of educational architecture and policy making in today's education systems (McLaughlin, 2008).

Myanmar, a country of developing status, is facing many challenges in reforming its education system (Walailak University & Ulla, 2018). Currently, the production of knowledge, its application, as well as the qualification of teachers in Myanmar are not suitable for improving the whole education system in the country, where 25% of teachers are not relevantly qualified (UNESCO, 2017). In this reform stage, paying attention to collaboration between universities and schools is a key priority since it provides the bridge to connect the academic world with the practitioners' world (theory-practice nexus) and it offers a special opportunity to see what is lacking and what is needed to improve in education (Hardman, 2013).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The origins of school-university partnerships (SUP)

To trace the origin of school-university partnerships, teacher education should be considered as the main source for its beginning. School-university partnerships were given more attention by scholars when the quality of school teaching decreased (Tsui et al., 2009). Since teacher education was identified as one of the least developed research areas in education, several scholars tried to analyse and investigate this field. Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2008) investigated teacher education in the United States and outlined four dominant approaches to understanding and studying this field. They observed shifts between the 1920s to present time between these approaches. The four dominant approaches include (1) teacher education as a curriculum problem during the 1920s to 1950s, (2) teacher education as a training problem from the 1950s to the 1980s, (3) teacher education as a learning problem from early 1980s to the early 2000s, and (4) teacher education as a policy problem from mid 1990s to the present time (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008). The focus on school-university partnerships was increasing, particularly between 1980s and 1990s, when Cochran-Smith and colleagues identified the teacher training and learning problem as the dominant approach. With the growing concern for teacher education, school-university partnerships for the all-round development of education became a major tool in the education field for promoting the quality of teacher education.

The popularity of school-university partnerships started with criticism of the quality of teacher education (Tsui et al., 2009). In the United States, criticism of teacher education and the decline in the professional development of school teachers led to the establishment of the Holmes Group in 1987 - a group of academic officers from universities across the US (Holmes Group, 1986). The collaboration and agreement between these academic officers led to the birth of

professional development schools, which improved the quality of education of initial teacher education, continuous professional development, and research and development in teacher education. School-university partnerships for initial teacher training has become popular and strategically supported in the United States (Rowley et al., 2013).

Before the creation of professional development schools, American educational experts set goals for reforming teacher education (Holmes Group, 1986). Five goals were set by the Holmes Group experts that focused mainly on encouraging the qualification of teachers and to call for well qualified prospective teachers in the teaching profession. Among the five goals, one was focused on the establishment of school-university partnerships, "to connect our own institutions to schools" - the explanation of this goal showed a growing attention to the role of schools in educating teachers, "schools must become places where both teachers and university faculty can systematically inquire into practice and improve it" (Holmes Group, 1986).

1.2. Broader concepts of partnership

In this section, some broader concepts supporting a better understanding of school-university partnerships are discussed.
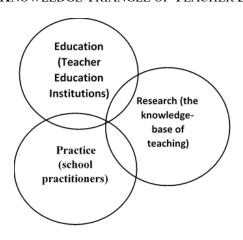
1.2.1. Knowledge triangle

The knowledge triangle is seen as an important tool for enhancing innovation processes through connecting the key drivers of the knowledge-based society, namely, education, research and innovation (Groumpos, 2013). According to Sjoer (2011), the knowledge triangle is conceived as the conceptual tool in which research, education and innovation are linked together with their respective processes on its three sides. According to him, the knowledge triangle renovates the flow of information among actors. In the traditional approach, the information only goes from research to education and from educators to students. In contrast to this traditional way, knowledge triangle considers interactive flow of information between three partners: research, education and innovation.

Halasz (2016) utilized this knowledge triangle concept in teacher education. In his issues paper on school-university partnership, he applied the knowledge triangle model to education sector where innovation takes place in schools supported by educational research and teacher education (Figure 1).

The issue paper proposed the knowledge triangle of teacher education model. In this model, three areas are seen as essential to be connected and to interact for promotion of teacher education. In this model, the universities stand as the centres for educating teachers and doing research where schools stand as the centre of innovation (Halasz, 2016). According to him, knowledge and learning can only be created effectively if there is partnership between schools and universities.

FIGURE 1. KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Halasz, 2016

1.2.2. Horizontal knowledge sharing: Joint Practice Development

With the increased emphasis on teacher professional development during last four decades in the United Kingdom, there was a shift from a knowledge model of professional development to a practice model where the latter focuses more on shared professional practices and the former on the cognitive change through the acquisition of academic knowledge (Hargreaves, 2011). This reflects the broader trend of using horizontal knowledge sharing networks of schools to support educational development.

Hargreaves (2011) termed this kind of professional development as joint practice development (JPD). Joint practice development is a process where peers are sharing practices and interact in a learning process. This is not a one-way process, rather, it is an interactive process where the useful and valuable practices are shared by doing and are transferred from person to person. This joint practice development is different from the old model of professional development process where most of the knowledge comes from academics or authorities giving lectures or training courses. Hargreaves (2012) observed that the traditional model of professional development is not effective when success rate is measured for teachers who were participating in this old model. The teachers reported that the success rate is low when they listen and attend the training programs following traditional model of professional development (Hargreaves, 2012). Hargreaves explained the reason why the success rate is very low:

"The reason is so obvious: implementing the new practice in one's school or classroom often proves to be a much more difficult task than it appeared to be in the oral or written account of it. The practice was shared, certainly, but not actually transferred" (Hargreaves, 2012, p. 8).

On the other hand, joint practice development offers the most efficient and effective way of professional development by its three different features, including:

- It is a joint activity, in which two or more people interact and influence one another, in contrast to the non-interactive, unilateral character of much conventional 'sharing good practice'.

- It is an activity that focuses on teachers' professional practice, i.e. what they do, not merely what they know.

- It is a development of the practice, not simply a transfer of it from one person or place to another, and so a form of school improvement. (Hargreaves, 2012, p. 9)

According to the authors, the third feature of development is the most important because two or more people are interacting and collaborating in a practice where the new practices go beyond the transfer from person to person. JPD is an effective development of practice for two reasons. In the process of mentoring and coaching of JPD, the coach has to push himself to think in different ways and different perspectives because of the recipient's questions. At the same time, both coach and recipient have to reflect themselves to learn from their own practice to support, help and explain to each other. In this way, "sharing practice ends up as a co-construction of practice that entails incremental innovation" (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 11).

The single community itself becomes a very small unit to learn from various sources in the knowledge-based and networked world. According to (Stoll & Louis, 2008), collaborative and network-based learning is needed to reach learning sources outside the single community and from different communities.

1.2.3. The triple helix model

The triple helix model is created by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff by highlighting the need of collaboration between universities, industry and government for innovation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995).

The triple helix model can also be applied in the sector of education with the assumption that universities and research agencies should cooperate with schools and this should be supported by governments. From the perspective of the triple helix, the university is responsible for research and teaching and schools are conceived as industries and spaces of innovation, and the government is supposed to provide appropriate regulatory environment for their cooperation.

2. Contextual background

Myanmar which is strategically located between the economic hubs of China, India and ASEAN countries is also the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). At the end of the colonial period in 1948, Myanmar's education system was recognized superior to many other neighbouring states, with adult literacy rate around 60%. However, the country's education system turned into long-term decline for many decades and went down to the bottom of the league table of ASEAN countries for educational enrolment, achievement and investment after the military coup in 1962 (Borg et al., 2018).

As a developing country, Myanmar is facing many challenges in its education system. As the country is at the beginning stage of an ongoing process of building democratic education, new criticism and judgments are continuously emerging (Borg et al., 2018). Educational reform in Myanmar has a major focus on teacher education due to the recognition of the fact that improving school education depends mainly on strengthening the quality of teachers (Walailak University & Ulla, 2018)

For teacher training, there are three universities of education (UOE) and 25 teacher education colleges. Universities of Education (UoE) provide a five-year B.Ed. qualifying teachers to teach in high school. Education Colleges (ECs) provide a four-year B.Ed. qualifying teachers to teach in primary and middle school; the ECs are affiliated to a UoE (UNESCO, 2016).

3. Research questions

The aim of the study is to investigate the current school-university partnership practices and to explore the sources of possible tensions between partners in initial teacher training. To understand these phenomena in depth, two main research questions were developed; (1) what are the tensions between mentor teachers and student teachers? (2) How do the mentor teachers and student teachers handle and negotiate the tension?

Answering these research questions will increase knowledge about the current practices of school-university partnership in initial teacher training and might lead to a better understanding of the nature of collaboration. Within the context of partnership, these research questions aim to explore situations in which tensions might emerge, the factors influencing them, and also the ways partners handle and solve problems to reduce tensions.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Participants

There are three teacher training universities in Myanmar. This study only includes one teacher training university in the country. Six participants participated in the study, representing three student teachers from a teacher training university and three school teachers from Basic Education High Schools. All three student teachers had two-week practice teaching experiences at Basic Education High Schools.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews. Under the careful guidance and suggestion of experts, an interview guide and protocol before the data collection was developed. Interviewing phase took place in Basic Education High School and one University of Education. Each interview lasted about 30-40 minutes. The researcher followed the interview guide and protocol however additional questions were investigated when interesting and relevant events emerged during the interview processes.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. Three student teachers (ST) were interviewed individually by the researcher. Three mentor/school teachers (MT) who were the subject deans of the school where student teachers did their practical teaching were interviewed individually by the researcher. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. All the recording had been deleted after the transcription was done. Interview data were analysed through coding. Coding procedures were done by careful coding of the transcribed data.

Before starting the coding process, a first version of codebook was developed by the researcher. After careful analysis of the interviews transcripts, the researcher revised the codebook. Based on the second version of the codebook, the coding was repeated. The codebook was left open throughout the coding process, making it possible to include new items. In order to achieve reliability in data analysis, documents were coded at least two times by the researcher at different times.

5. Findings

This section will present the findings about the problems or tensions between partners and the way they are negotiated to solve tensions between them. Results revealed that there are three

major sources which cause tensions, namely, trust, different opinions and beliefs and disconnection among partners. On the other hand, different ways to reduce and solve the tensions include observing the source of tension, accepting and negotiating different ideas and beliefs, common participation in the school activities and intensifying collaboration with each other.

5.1. Trust issues

One of the factors that can challenge collaboration between schools and universities is the lack of trust. Trust does matter. A lack of trust has been revealed as a major obstacle in the school-university partnership literature and research (Burton & Greher, 2007; Walsh & Backe, 2013). In this study, the lack of trust becomes not only the "obstacle" for collaboration; it is also the manifestation of "the tension" between partners.

In case of practice teaching, student teachers are allocated to classrooms on the basis of their specific subject. On the first day of student teachers' practice teaching at schools, mentor teachers have given them the full authority to manage and teach classrooms. From this day, student teachers took full responsibilities for the classroom relating to teaching and learning.

According to interview results, mentor teachers feel that it is not correct to give student teachers the whole classroom to manage alone during this two-week practice teaching. Mentor teachers thought that student teachers could not handle the classrooms and the lesson because they are still too young and do not have experiences in teaching and managing classroom.

"*I think they are still too young and have no experiences of teaching. I am so afraid to give them the whole classroom*" (MT1)

"*Different student teachers always come to our school every year, at this time. And the lessons for these two months are very important and difficult. So, I don't like to give the whole class to the student teachers because these lessons are very important and concepts are needed to be well explained. This is one problem*". (MT2)

Trust seems to be a key factor of the relationship between partners. On the other side, student teachers felt that the mentor teachers didn't have trust on them. This became the burden for them in teaching and learning. They felt like they didn't have the privacy for teaching and managing the classroom.

"*Mentor teacher gave us her notes about the lesson and told me to teach according to the notes. This made me feel frustrated. I have my own styles and don't want to follow her notes.*" (ST2)

"*Some of my friends have experienced that mentor teachers are watching and coming to see them while they are teaching. Sometimes, during the lesson, mentor teacher came to the classroom and tell the students to pay attention to us (our teaching). But I think this is not necessary. We can manage the classroom.*" (ST3)

The situation between partners is tensed because of lack of trust on each other. However, these tensions were handled by both partners. The tension was solved when school teachers directly asked student teachers and they negotiated the situations. Another handling method for a mentor teacher was to observe the student teachers teaching in the classroom and expressing her satisfaction towards them.

5.2. Different beliefs and attitudes

When two different entities collaborate, it is very common that they have different perspectives, beliefs and attitudes. The important thing to handle this situation is to try to accept and negotiate the different perspectives. According to our interviews, different beliefs and attitudes also led to tension between partners in a school-university partnership.

During two week of practice teaching, mentor teachers wanted student teachers to finish more than two chapters of a given subject. For them, this is important because they are also teaching according to the course schedule. Therefore, mentor teachers asked student teachers to finish teaching at least two chapters during two week of practice teaching. For the mentor teacher, finishing the given work (teaching two chapters) was in the focus of mentor-mentee relationship and a key factor of practice teaching.

"*During these two weeks, we mainly asked them to finish two chapters. We are teaching according to the schedule and it is important to finish in time*." (MT3)

On the other side, student teachers dislike the idea of rushing in teaching. They wanted to teach using different teaching aids, and to explore how new or specific new teaching methods work in practice. Student teachers wanted to take time to prepare lesson and to teach lesson carefully and slowly to give the required concept.

"*Mentor teachers want me to teach two chapters to finish during these two weeks. I followed her advice, and tried to finish in time. But, because of this, I can't teach really well. I am just rushing to finish the lesson, and it made me stressed. I was worried all the time for not finishing the lessons in a given time. I regret that now. I couldn't concentrate my teaching and couldn't teach so well. My focus was on finishing, not on perfect teaching*." (ST2)

"*But two weeks practical teaching is not enough for us. We can't know and learn everything very well. This is a very short period. There are three things I always follow in my mind whenever I plan my lesson to teach. (1) To check the nature of examination, for example, which part of lesson is important for students to sit the exam, which notes should I give for the exams, etc. (2) To connect the content and the practical, I always try to connect the lesson and how to apply this lesson in the daily life and practical life. (3) Happiness of the child, how to teach the children to enjoy the lesson, etc. But, they said that "this is what you have to teach during these two weeks*" (ST1)

Another different belief between mentor teachers and student teachers is about communicating with children.

"*My mentor teacher told me that 'not to be very friendly with children'. But I don't understand this. She may refer to something else. May be she is afraid that children won't respect us if we are too friendly with them. But, this is a very strange advice. From my point of view, if we communicate with the children in a proper way, friendly, it is good. We can be friendly with our children in a proper and correct way*". (ST1)

"*When I was in my practical teaching, it is really difficult to communicate with teachers. I found that school teachers rarely give compliments to children*" (ST2).

This differing opinion is the tension which was not solved during the practice teaching of the student teachers. All the three student teachers mentioned that they were pushed to teach to

finish several chapters during their practical teaching. On the other hand, mentor teachers also had a huge burden for teaching and finishing lesson in time according to national curriculum schedule. This is one of the major tensions which need to be handled.

5.3. Disconnection

Learning can be more effective when there is an interactive learning environment in the organization.

On the based on the results of this study, student teachers and mentor teachers had no real collaboration and they were disconnected from each other. A group of student teachers were given a private room and this led to disconnection from school teachers' community and school community. On the other hand, school teachers (or) mentor teachers assumed that giving a private room for student teachers was aimed to provide them more privacy and freedom for student teachers.

"*During our practical teaching, the school gave a separate room for us. So, I felt like I am separated from all teachers at schools. We didn't have any closeness, communication and friendship among us. I don't like this. I couldn't see, and learn what the teachers are doing and talking and collaborating. Mostly, I have to discuss and reflect with my friends in my teaching during practicum. We didn't have a chance to discuss with teachers. This is sad*" (ST1)

"*Student teachers, they are at another room. Principal asked us to give them a private room. So, I don't really know what they are doing or what is happening there. I told them to come to me if they have any questions about the lesson or teaching. I am welcome. But we are a bit separated from each other. But I think this is also good for them. They can freely talk and do what they want in their private room. If they are with us, they may be a bit nervous or stressed, I think. This is good for them*" (MT3)

According to interviewees' response, this obstacle was coped with annual school's ceremony or school activities. Student teachers and school teachers built closer relationship when they were participating in school's activities and ceremonies.

6. Discussion

As school-university partnership initial teacher training becomes one of the major areas in teacher education, sources of issues and solution for problems are also explored. Based on the literature, the unequal power relationships and difference values and opinion between schools and universities are common obstacles for both organizations (Martin et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). Workload and too much teaching tasks rise as major pressure for mentor teachers while lack of clear guidelines and structure for practice teaching are unpleasant factors for student teachers (Botha & Beets, n.d.). On the other hand, trust is not only the sources of developing tension but also the solution for building a strong relationship between partners (Johnston, 1997). The results of this study show that some of the above obstacles are the major obstacles for establishing effective learning community between student teachers and mentor teachers.

6.1. Trust and different beliefs between partners

According to the interviews conducted, student teachers and mentor teachers showed lack of trust. Student teachers preferred teaching according to their methods and didn't want to follow the notes and lesson plan given by mentor teachers. On the other side, mentor teachers were not

sure that student teachers can handle the classroom alone. Checking student teachers' teaching by mentor teachers made student teachers frustrated.

Openness and trust between partners became the major obstacle to build mutual learning environment. At first, the partners did not try to collaborate. Though mentor teachers guided student teachers indirectly by giving her lesson notes and lesson plans, they didn't openly discuss what they want to get and what they expect from student teachers. Nevertheless, mentor teachers were afraid of letting student teachers to give the whole classroom control.

On the other side, student teachers denied using these lesson notes and plans from the mentor teachers. They liked to teach and use their own teaching methods.

This lack of trust can be connected to teacher identity. Student teachers have a strong beliefs and ideas in their teaching styles and methods while mentor teachers want them to use their notes and lesson plans. Mentor teachers' lack of trust in student teachers' teaching led to checking student teachers while they were teaching. Student teachers felt that they are being controlled while they are trying to build their identity.

Having different opinion and attitudes in teaching and learning is another obstacles and interesting factor in school-university partnership for initial teacher training. At university of education in Myanmar, practice teaching for student teachers is only two weeks. Student teachers have to do their practice teaching in their third year and fourth year and each lasts only two weeks. Many student teachers complained about not having enough time for their practice teaching. On the contrary, mentor teachers gave them a load of work to finish teaching at least two chapters of a subject during these two weeks. For mentor teachers, finishing lessons according to schedule is important because of huge workload and teaching tasks to complete in time. For student teachers, delivering lesson to motivate students and to get essential concepts are more important than finishing lessons according to schedule.

Another thing to consider is the matter of generational and social perceptions between mentor teachers and student teachers. Student teachers' belief in communicating with children in a friendly and open way is the opposite of mentor teachers' assumption. This needs to be considered as one of the main important factors between student teacher and mentor teachers that made them separated.

6.2. Disconnection

One interesting point is the privacy consideration between mentor teachers and student teachers. Student teachers felt that they are neglected by school community when they are given a private room. A group of student teachers felt that they are separated from all teachers in the schools and they didn't like that kind of separation.

For mentor teachers, they also mentioned that they didn't know what student teachers were doing because the partners were in two separate rooms. On the other hand, mentor teachers thought that this is good for student teachers to talk freely among their friends in the group.

This made a thought that student teachers like having a privacy related to their teaching and classroom management while they didn't like to have no connection with teachers as colleagues. This also concern with identity as student teachers wanted to communicate with other teachers as their colleagues. This finding showed that student teachers wanted their

privacy in classroom teachers; however, they also wanted to be a part of the school teachers' community.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that there is tension between partners in school-university partnerships in teacher training in Myanmar. Based on the interview results, tensions are mainly caused because of trust, different opinion and beliefs. Tension could be reduced and solved if schools and universities developed more intensive partnerships.

Besides this, the limited time for practice teaching is also one of the major barriers for collaboration. According to student teachers and school teachers, the practice teaching should be longer than two weeks since two weeks duration is too short for building trust and effective learning between partners. To be effective in student teachers' practice teaching as well as for school teachers' learning, the practice teaching duration should be extended to some amount of time.

In conclusion, through the collaboration between schools and universities, the teacher education system in Myanmar could be significantly improved and advanced. Starting from collaboration for initial teacher training, it can also expand for further improvements from professional development to research development areas of teacher education. In such a way, school-university partnerships in Myanmar could be one of the main sources for fostering teacher education.

Acknowledgements

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