

Professional Development and Learning of Teacher Educators – Case Study of a Community of Practice (CoP) Formed During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India

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Abstract

Communities of Practice (CoP) have been recognised globally as a potential tool to support teacher educators' professional learning. This paper reports the formation of a virtual, inter-institutional community of practice (CoP) of 278 prospective and practising teacher educators in India during the COVID-19-induced lockdown in 2020. Using an online survey, focus group discussions, and interviews, the paper presents the challenges in the profession identified by teacher educators, their needs and expectations from the CoP, their perceptions about the CoP's contributions towards their own learning, and the extent of their engagement over four months with the CoP. There were 68 respondents to the survey, of which 33 were practising teacher educators. They recognised the potential of CoP as a space to enhance their own learning. Through their participation in the CoP, teacher educators reported gaining confidence in engaging with current educational discourses, sharing ideas and practices, and trying out different pedagogical approaches. They identified poor status, pay and working conditions, inadequate opportunities for professional development, and limited access to academic networking as key challenges. The study indicates that virtual CoPs have the potential to modify and bring about learning in a diverse group of people through mutual engagement.

Keywords: *virtual community, challenges of teacher educators in India, academic isolation of teacher educators, values ascribed to CoP, mutual engagement of practising and prospective teacher educators*

Introduction

Teacher educators' professional development and learning have been an area of interest globally in recent times. Professional learning is complex and includes social dynamics and institutional processes, with most learning arising 'out of the demands and challenges of work, solving problems, improving quality and/or productivity or coping with change, and out of social interactions in the workplace' (Eraut 2012, 22). Given the complexity and challenges of a teacher educator's role, Cochran-Smith (2003) asserts that a program to prepare teacher educators alone is not sufficient to bring role clarity or support practice.

Opportunities for continuous professional development and developing a professional learning community of teacher educators are therefore essential to strengthen the quality of teacher education (Amott and Ang 2020; Hadar and Brody 2018; Jiménez-Silva and Olson, 2012). Literature indicates systematic professional development opportunities for teacher educators are as yet lacking (Cochran-Smith et al. 2019; MacPhail et al. 2019; Smith 2003; Swennen et al. 2010). However, as autonomous and responsible professionals, teacher educators have taken charge of their own professional learning through various activities (Ping et al. 2018), among which self-study remains quite popular (Kitchen et al. 2020; Loughran 2014).

Facilitating communities of practice has also been found to support professional learning among teacher educators, especially in their early careers, in countries with diverse educational settings (Amott and Ang 2020; Hadar and Brody 2010; Karunanayaka et al. 2007; Patton and Parker 2017; Widodo and Allamnakhrah 2020). 'As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises', communities hold the key to 'real transformation', having real effects on the lives of professionals (Wenger 1998, 85). Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011) go on to define how the effects of being an active part of a CoP generates values for the community and beyond and provide a framework comprising of a set of five values which include, 'immediate value' in terms of involvement in activities and interactions; 'potential value' as gaining knowledge capital; 'applied value' through changes in practice; 'realised value' as seen from improved performance; and 'reframing value' that is potentially transformative. Without specifying what counts as value, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, 68) provide a theory of mutual engagement as value creation in social learning spaces and point out, '(t)he centrality of agency shifts the focus from something being learned to the lived experience of value'. The increasing importance of communities of practice for teacher educators highlights that professional learning is strongly linked to practice (Kelchtermans et al. 2018) and allows for the development of adaptive expertise (Bolisani et al. 2021), which prescriptions through policies and institutional mandates tend to lose sight of (Vann and Bowker 2001). Professional communities also provide motivation for 'social-cognitive learning' and engender 'creativity' through collaborations among colleagues across 'different levels of experience' (Gutman 2021, 273).

In the case of India, the isolation of teacher education institutions, most of which are private, stand-alone colleges with few professional development opportunities, do not support teacher educators'

professional learning (Batra 2014; Takker and Ramchand 2023). As with the global new public management trend of increasing accountability, teacher education in the country is highly regulated with minimal state investment (Sarangapani and Sayed 2021). Policies and reform efforts are top-down with teacher educators having little voice and agency (Setty 2014; Sharma 2019). Teacher educators are mandated to have post-graduate degrees in education and relevant academic discipline (NCTE 2014). While teacher educators have been criticised for their inability to adapt (Raina 1995), little involvement in research (Dyer et al. 2002), and lack of pedagogical imaginations (Batra 2019), neither their academic nor professional qualifications prepare them adequately for their roles (Ramchand 2016). Beyond conferences, seminars, and sporadic workshops mandated faculty development for promotions, which is generic and common for all higher education faculty, teacher educators have limited ongoing professional development opportunities. There is also no evidence of a vibrant CoP for teacher educators to support their professional learning. A national association of teacher educators was established in the country in 1959, but with an institutional membership numbering forty, it is neither representative of the 16,614 teacher education institutions recognised by the regulatory body in India (NCTE 2021) nor does it offer anything beyond annual conferences. The recent National Education Policy recognises the need for the professional development of teacher educators (GoI 2020), but it remains to be seen if the policy directive is backed by financial commitments and more importantly the nature and structure that the professional development opportunities will take.

This paper reports the emergence of an inter-institutional community of practice (CoP) of prospective and practising teacher educators during the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and the

subsequent shift to virtual teaching for all educational institutions in India. Building on CoPs as a potential means for professional learning for teacher educators and the mutual engagement that it engenders as generating value for the community (Hader and Brody 2018; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020), the paper reports the challenges in the profession that teacher educators identified, needs and expectations that the participating teacher educators perceived could be fulfilled by a CoP, their perceptions about the contributions of the CoP towards their own learning and the extent of their engagement over four months with the CoP that emerged. Communities of practice need not necessarily have a formal design but can evolve naturally through networks and collaborations among practitioners while engaging in activities and discussions, sharing resources, and facilitating knowledge generation (Bates 2022). The formulation of the CoP described in this paper is aligned with this conception and informs our study reported here. It is hoped that the study contributes to the growing global discourse on teacher educators' professional development and learning by way of illuminating a representative context of India, which has hitherto not received adequate attention.

The Context

Recognising the intellectual isolation of teacher educators in the Indian context, which the lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated in multiple ways, two universities in Mumbai, a city in Western India, decided to collaborate to facilitate the ongoing academic learning of the two-year M.Ed program. The faculty of the collaborating universities planned a series of synchronous webinar sessions once a week between April and June 2020. A total of ten sessions were held during this period. Eminent scholars and practitioners from across the country were invited to speak on topics mapped to the M.Ed. curriculum. Initially begun for M.Ed. students of one University, the webinar series attracted participants from across India, including practising teacher educators, primarily through word of mouth. This resulted in an organic emergence of a virtual CoP, with some of the questions raised during the webinars being taken up for further discussions in the email group asynchronously and a few members initiating conversation around their areas of interest, thus reflecting the need for collegiality among teacher educators. The composition of the members of the CoP is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Composition of the CoP members

S.No.	Designation	Number of members
1.	M.Ed. students	161
2.	Teacher educators	99
3.	School teachers	8
4.	Research Scholars	6
5.	Principal of TEI	2
6.	Others (unspecified)	2
Total		278

The members were from seventy-six different institutions across India. Figure 1 below shows the number of institutions divided as

per their geographical location, i.e. centre, north, south, east, and west of India.

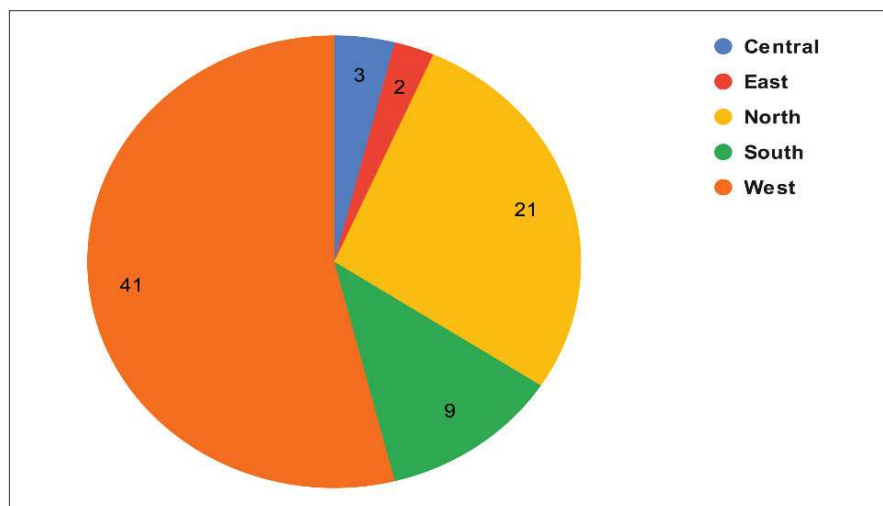


Figure 1: Region-wise distribution of CoP members' institutions across India (No. of institutions)

The webinars began primarily for the M. Ed students and they constitute the most significant number in the CoP, followed by teacher educators. Nearly two-fifths of members' affiliating institutions are from the state of Maharashtra.

Method

A qualitative case study approach is used to understand the CoP of teacher educators that emerged in a particular context during a specific period (Merriam 1998). The qualitative case study is a research methodology that aids in the in-depth exploration of a phenomenon within a specific context using multiple data sources (Baxter and Jack 2008). The phenomenon being studied is the virtual and interinstitutional CoP for prospective teachers and teacher educators. Data was collected through multiple sources including, an online survey, focus group discussions, and interviews conducted virtually, with a purposive sample from among those who volunteered. The online survey form was shared on the CoP in July 2020 after the completion of the webinar series. This survey

aimed to probe the members' motivation for joining the CoP and their expectations from it, their professional challenges, and the ways in which the CoP can address those challenges. After a preliminary analysis of the survey data, focus group discussions were conducted virtually, with a sub-sample of fifteen who responded to an open invitation to participate, to explore in more detail the views expressed in the survey. Using purposive sampling, participants were then selected and invited to participate in one-on-one interviews, to which three of them agreed. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the findings of the survey and group discussion responses. A narrative analysis of the CoP posts on the email group across the period of four months from April to July 2020 was also taken up. The analysis from the four sets of data supported 'the process of making meaning' of the CoP, as perceived by its members, and reflected its potential as a professional learning space (Merriam 1998, 178).

This study asked the following specific research questions:

1. What are the challenges teacher educators face in their profession?
2. What motivated them to join the CoP?
3. What is their perception of what they have gained from their participation in the CoP?

Sample

Out of the 278 members of the CoP, 68 responded to the survey voluntarily. They were informed about the research being conducted and their role in it. Data were anonymised for analysis. The profile of participants according to their designations is given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Profile of survey participants

Designation of participant	No. of participants
M.Ed. Students	21
Teacher Educators	33
School Teachers	5
Principal of TEI	1
Research Scholars	6
Others	2
Total	68

Nearly 50 per cent of the total respondents were teacher educators, while 80 per cent of the survey respondents were female. Two-fifths of them were novices with less than five

years of teaching experience. Figure 2 below shows the percentage of respondents based on their years of teaching.

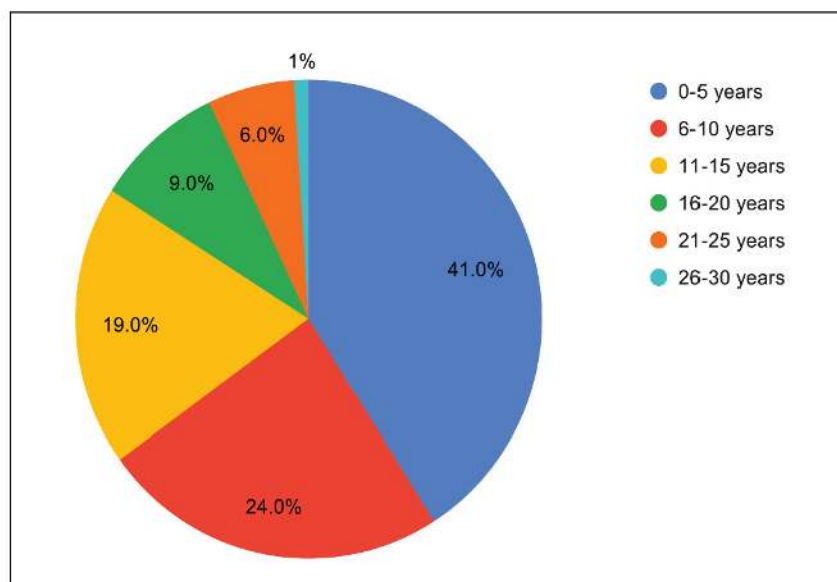


Figure 2: Years of teaching experience of respondents

Of the fifteen members who volunteered for the focus group discussions, two were male and thirteen were female. There were nine M.Ed. students, five teacher educators, and one teacher, and they were randomly assigned to two parallel groups through the break-out room option on the Zoom meeting platform.

For the interview, members were categorised using three criteria depending on their level of participation in the CoP. The first criterion was that the member should have participated in the survey and group interview. The second criterion was that the member should have participated in the survey and attended at least six webinars out of ten. The third criterion was that the member's participation in the group should have been either minimal or absolutely nil; there was no representation from this group. Two members fitting each of the criteria were selected randomly and an email invite was sent to them. One member (I1) selected under the first criteria who agreed to be interviewed was a female M.Ed. student from a private university. Two members selected as per the second criterion agreed to participate in the interviews. Among them, one was a male M.Ed. student from the Department of Education at a State University (I2), while the other was a female teacher educator from a private teacher education institution that received grant-in-aid from the state (I3). Two other members selected as per the third criterion did not respond to our request for an interview. All the interviews were conducted online.

Data Analysis

The data from focus group interviews and individual interviews were recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. All the data including that from the survey was anonymised for analysis. The quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics and

frequency distribution was used to represent data on CoP group posts.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Patton 2002) was used to identify patterns in the open-ended responses from the survey and the interview data. Posts on the CoP group were reviewed and classified into broad categories based on the nature (announcement, query, discussion, etc.) of the posts indicating engagement in the CoP. Following an iterative process of coding and looking for patterns across the three kinds of data helped the larger themes to emerge (Miles and Huberman 1994) which were then used to interpret the findings as discussed in the next section.

Findings

This section reports the summary of data from the survey, focus group discussions, and interviews to understand teacher educators' challenges, participants' needs and expectations from the CoP, and their perceptions of what they gained from it.

What are the challenges teacher educators face?

The ground narrative is set by the challenges identified by the teacher educators among the survey respondents. Three-fourths of teacher educators considered the status of their profession as most or moderately challenging while insufficient experience in school was identified as somewhat or least challenging by 40 per cent of the teacher educators (See Figure 3 below). Inadequate opportunities for professional development and academic networking emerged to be the next most challenging issues for teacher educators. Among the respondents, 64 per cent find a lack of career growth possibilities and poor pay and working conditions as the most challenging. Two-thirds of the teacher educators think a CoP had the potential to address some of their challenges.

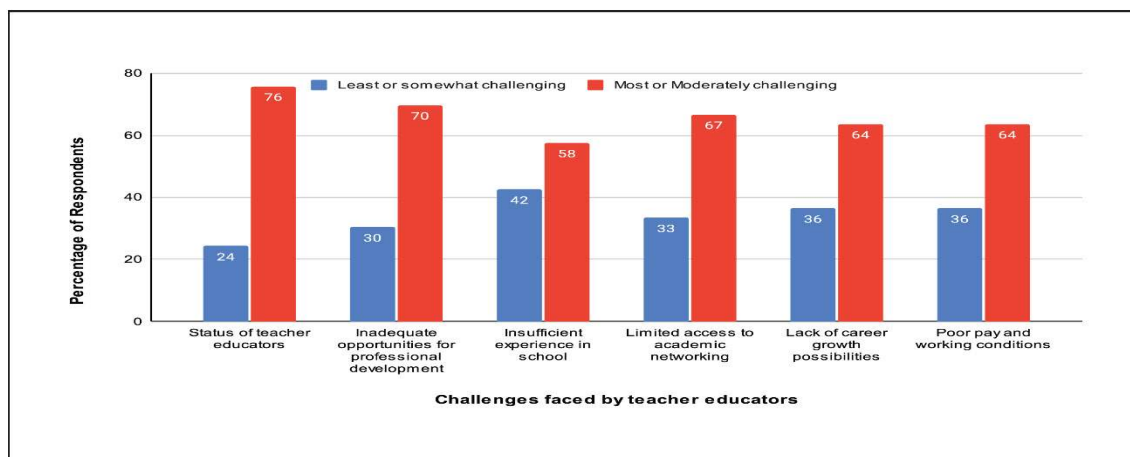


Figure 3. Challenges faced by teacher educators

The three respondents who participated in the interviews were able to reflect and articulate further the challenges they face. Some of it was felt more acutely by the teacher educator from the private institution.

‘Teacher educators in private institutions (are) burdened by paperwork. The need to build evidence hinders our teaching work.’ (I3)

The stressful conditions under which teacher educators work was noted by the respondents.

‘Teacher educators’ work not recognised as stressful and requiring minds-on involvement.’ (I2)

‘We do not get an opportunity to relax.’ (I3)

They felt a CoP could provide a collective forum of support ‘if everyone comes on board and talk about their work conditions.’ (I2)

The challenges identified by the respondents of the survey are mainly systemic arising from the poor status of teacher educators in the country, their academic isolation, lack of professional development opportunities, and poor working conditions. The survey indicates teacher educators think a CoP can help address some of these challenges.

What motivated them to join the CoP?

Among their reasons for joining the CoP, 91 per cent of participants stated that they wanted to enhance their learning while around 28 per cent wanted to improve their practice. 17 per cent of participants joined the CoP to network with colleagues. Six participants mentioned they joined CoP as they had spare time during the lockdown period (See Figure 4 below).

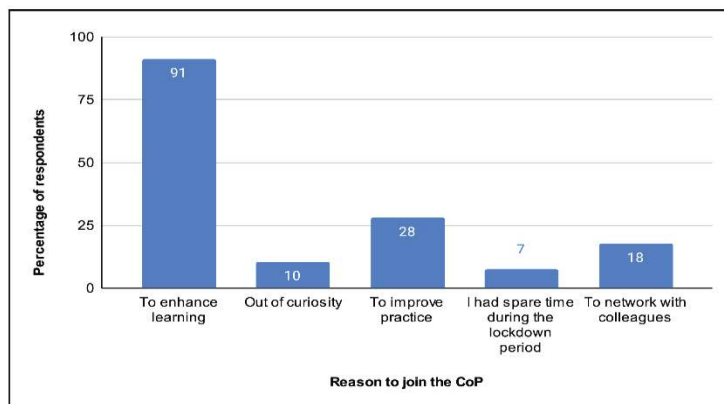


Figure 4: Members' reasons to join the CoP

Participants were also asked about the kind of activities that they would like to engage in CoP (See Figure 5 below). More than 75 per cent of participants reported that they would like to attend periodic talks by experts and that relevant readings should be shared on the CoP. Fifty-three per cent

chose collectively curating OERs as an activity while 42 per cent wanted to engage in policy-level advocacy. This data later encouraged us to organise design-thinking workshops to design and curate OERs and panel discussions to facilitate the mutual sharing of ideas and practices.

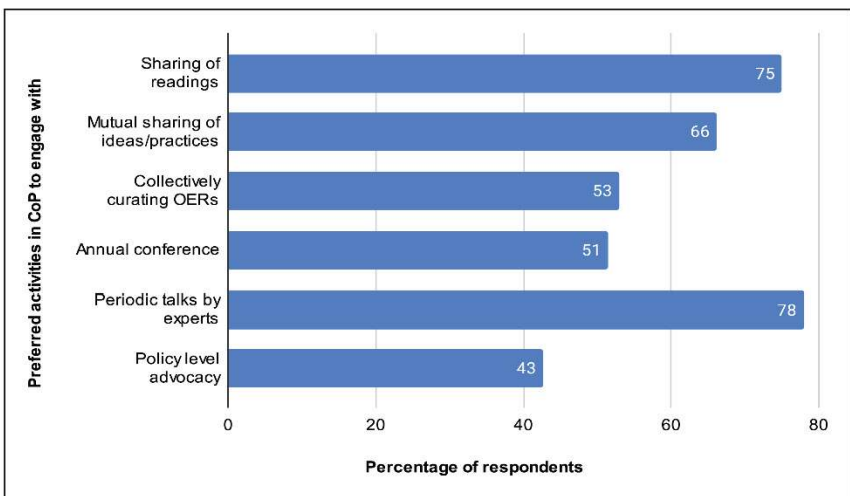


Figure 5. Members' preferred activities in the CoP

These needs and expectations were corroborated and elaborated upon by the participants in the focus group discussions. They wanted the CoP to provide opportunities for small groups of practitioners to undertake research and support them with writing and publishing as well. They also expected the CoP to share posts on information related to teacher education including the constantly changing policy directives, regulations, new initiatives, etc. They expressed that the CoP can fulfil this by creating a repository of authentic information on teacher education that they could rely on. Reiterating the potential and applied values they sought from the CoP, participants wanted opportunities to create research-based practice, share experiences on the CoP for peer review, wanted to work on collaborative projects in small groups among members of CoPs, and document and share outputs.

During the interviews, the M.Ed. student admitted that she:

(had) no high expectations because (I) thought of it as any other webinar that was being conducted during the pandemic from April to June. Had attended many already, hence was in two minds whether to sign up for this or not (I1).

One respondent felt the CoP 'helps accelerate novices to advance since (we) can learn from experts and gain from their experience' (I2). Another respondent felt the CoP 'has the potential to address many challenges because people are attached to the group, dissemination is happening in a larger way' (I3).

While three-fourths of the participants either sought increased knowledge capital for themselves or support for their teaching and research practices, nearly two-fifths see the CoP as a potential space for transformation by means of bringing in a collective voice to address their challenges and exercise their agency in bringing about policy changes.

What did they gain from participating in the CoP?

The survey asked respondents to report what they gained from being members of the CoP (see Figure 6 below). In terms of gain in confidence, 88 per cent indicated an improvement in engaging with current discourse in education and 84 per cent

in sharing ideas and practices with other members of the CoP. More than half of the respondents reported that participation in the CoP had increased their confidence in forming a CoP at their own institute or with neighbouring institutes. Three-fourths of the respondents felt confident trying different pedagogical approaches and advocating for policy change after participating in the CoP.

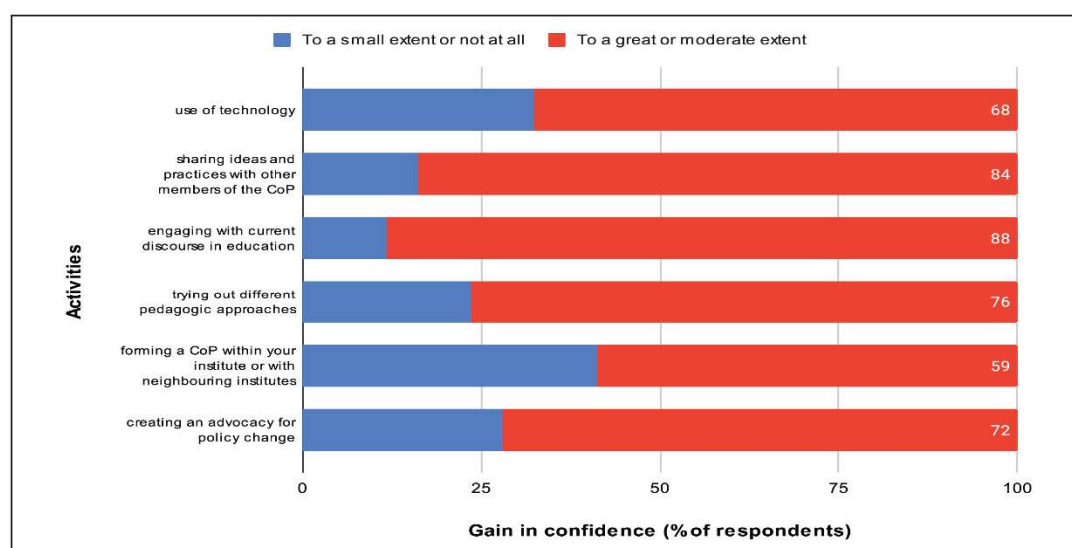


Figure 6. Gain in confidence from being a CoP member

Respondents who participated in the focus group discussions shared that the webinar series was a welcome relief in the early part of the pandemic, and the opportunity to network kept them motivated. They enjoyed being a part of academic discussions and learning. They reported that the webinar topics were relevant and gave an impetus to thinking and sharing practices in teaching and learning. They expressed happiness that the webinars enabled them to interact with national-level experts. The CoP helped generate discussions among themselves and reflect on their learning and practice. In the course of the discussions, it emerged that pre-reading was a new experience for many participants, and one teacher educator reported that she has now incorporated this practice in her own B.Ed. classes. The participants shared that the diverse ideas that the CoP generated were also novel experiences and helped them develop multiple

and comparative perspectives. One teacher educator reported having shared ideas with her colleagues soon after the OER design sessions and trying out a collaborative design and collation of OERs with them. M.Ed. students especially stressed that the CoP has broadened their understanding of teacher education and made them more aware of its issues, taught them to be careful about quoting sources while sharing ideas publicly, helped to expand their views, connect with internship experience, and provided an opportunity to interact with other students and teacher educators across the country and share each other's views. One M.Ed. student shared that she is generally reticent in face-to-face interactions but found the confidence to share in the online group. All of them agreed that mixed groups are good for learning and questions and discussion on the forum triggered thinking and encouraged discussions that extended beyond the CoP.

One teacher educator said participation in the CoP helped reaffirm her belief that teachers are catalysts to social change and forced her to think about solutions she can implement. Others concurred that it gave them the confidence to express ideas and see different solutions to the same problems. Rather than relying on individual opinions, the CoP has pushed them to find authentic resources to formulate ideas.

In the interview, the M.Ed. student reported that:

(the webinar series) was a great learning experience, it was more enlightening. This would not be possible if one reads in isolation, it was made possible because we were in a group, and listening to eminent speakers made a lot of sense (I1).

Another respondent shared that '(of) all the webinars I attended, this (webinar series offered through the CoP) was the most useful and best, and (I) caught up on the recording of the (sessions) missed out' (I3). She went on to reflect that in practice, '(we) need not be scared to make mistakes – something new, innovative we are prone to mistakes but can learn from them' but accountability measures do not provide such opportunities. The teacher educator expressed that the CoP 'helped to see the value of dialoguing and not be closed to different viewpoints'. In the words of the M.Ed. student, '(t)here are a lot of

open discussions, people have the flexibility to speak their voices, gave confidence that I too can contribute to the knowledge base of teacher education' (I2).

Posts made on the email group were analysed to get a sense of the level of participation and engagement in the CoP across the period of four months during which the webinar series and a panel discussion were conducted. Posts were reviewed and classified into broad categories based on their nature. Figure 7 below shows the number of responses by CoP members to each post on the email group. Out of the seventy-four unique posts on the CoP analysed for this study, more than half were related to the webinar series, which included weekly announcements of the webinar along with the relevant readings. This was followed by the questions and responses during and after each session when the recordings of the webinar were made available to members. Some webinar sessions, in particular, resulted in more active participation from members of the CoP, and meaningful discussions were observed among them after the sessions. This is highlighted by the red coloured figures in the graph. The last part of the graph indicates a dip after the end of the webinar series. The slight increase towards the end is because of posts related to a panel discussion organised in the last week of July after the webinar series.

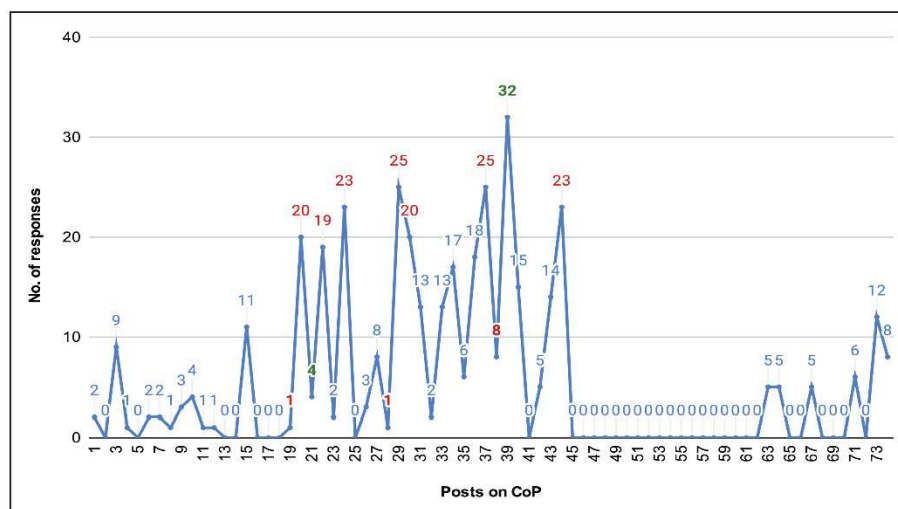


Figure 7. Activity on the CoP

Participation in the email group in the form of posts does not corroborate the enthusiasm shared by the survey respondents reported earlier. It could be the case that those who volunteered for the study were the ones who posted and responded to the group or benefited most from the posts. But both in the discussions and interviews, participants pointed out that email was not a convenient format for a CoP, especially when they wanted to return to a discussion thread. They suggested shifting to social media platforms like WhatsApp would be helpful. But more than half of them reported forming smaller groups across institutions.

Discussion

The members of the CoP reported here are not representative of the larger community of teacher educators in India. They chose to join the CoP voluntarily out of shared interest during the pandemic. The CoP emerged as a response to the shift to virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the initial context was a set of webinars organised to engage M.Ed. students (those preparing to become teacher educators), it engendered mutual engagement among practising and prospective teacher educators in the form of questions and responses during the webinar and discussions on the email group and beyond (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020; Wenger 1998). The study sample drawn from this group was also self-selected. The discussion in this section gives an understanding of one CoP that emerged in a particular context at a particular time. Nevertheless, considering the members of the CoP are diverse and from across India with a range of institutional affiliations, it offers the possibility of exploring CoP for the professional learning of teacher educators and value creation for the community that faces innumerable challenges in the country. Teacher educators in this study identified poor status, pay, and working conditions as challenging aspects of the profession. Inadequate opportunities for professional development and limited access to academic

networking were also identified as challenges. The latter are reported from other parts of the globe (Cochran-Smith et al. 2019; MacPhail et al. 2019; Smith 2003; Swennen et al. 2010). While policies in India recognise the academic isolation of teacher educators and their lack of professional development (GoI 2012, 2020), they are silent about the poor status and low pay among teacher educators, a majority of whom are employed in private institutions. Stressful working conditions were also highlighted by the respondents of this study. In a bid to ensure the quality of teacher preparation in a landscape dominated by private players, teacher education is highly regulated in India. This, in combination with a pervasive performativity culture, has meant substantive paperwork for teacher educators, especially in private institutions. Challenges can act as a potential trigger for a joint enterprise involved in setting up a CoP (Bolisani et al. 2021), and two-thirds of the teacher educators in this study value CoP as a potential space to address some of their challenges.

The members of the CoP valued the mutual engagement the CoP afforded reported in this study. The values that participants ascribe to CoP and what they have gained from participating in it are discussed under the values creation framework below (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020).

Immediate and Potential Values

Teacher educators (91% of the survey respondents) in this study recognised the value of CoP as a space to enhance their own learning. This is backed by literature which indicates that community paves the way to breaking professional isolation (Brody and Hader 2015) and leads to professional learning for teacher educators (Patton and Parker 2017).

Regarding what they gained from the CoP, teacher educators reported primarily gaining confidence in engaging with current discourses in education (88%) and sharing ideas and practices (84%). All the participants in the focus group discussions

and interviews reported they enjoyed being a part of the academic learning and discussions in the larger group. They expressed happiness for the opportunity to interact with ‘national-level’ experts and for being able to listen to ‘diverse’ ideas, which they are unable to generally access given the isolation of teacher education institutions in the country (GoI 2020). Participants actively sought and clarified ideas as seen in the increased posts soon after a webinar session. The prospective teacher educators (M.Ed. students) reported gaining confidence through these opportunities for virtual interaction. A CoP involving professionals with varying levels of experience has been shown to engender confidence and gain knowledge capital among its participants (Gutman 2021).

Applied and Realised Values

In this study, less than one-quarter of the members joined the CoP with any expectations to improve practice but identified the CoP as a potential space to create a shared repertoire of research-based practice. Scholars have pointed out that the professional development of teacher educators should include a dialectic of research and practice (Cochran-Smith et al. 2019) since the role of a teacher educator includes excellence in both teaching and researching (Smith and Flores 2019).

In terms of what they gained, respondents reported having gained confidence in trying out different pedagogical approaches (76%) and two-thirds in setting up their own CoPs. Social and collaborative learning was engendered through cross-learning across institutions, as reported by the respondents in the focus group discussions and interviews. They reported that the webinar sessions generated internal discussions and reflections among participants of the same institution. There were a few examples of adoption and diffusion of ideas through the setting up of local CoPs and trying out ideas such as, the design and collation of OERs and adopting pedagogic practices such

as assigning pre-readings and initiating discussions. These self-reports align with the global literature on the potential of CoP to support professional learning and practice among teacher educators (Widodo and Allamnakhrah 2020; Hadar and Brody 2010).

The analysis of the CoP posts indicates the need for scaffolding to allow participants to share their practices on the CoP and provide meaningful triggers to keep the discussions around practice vibrant and safe. Since this was a mixed group, the tendency of some senior members to be critical of a novice’s practice acted as a deterrent for further discussions. Merely creating an opportunity for sharing is insufficient to sustain the interest of participants or create a safe space within the CoP. Time and effort are needed to manage a CoP deftly, especially in a culture given to hierarchies, and literature is largely silent on this aspect.

Transformative Values

Less than half of the survey respondents thought policy advocacy was important. This could be due to the fact that they lack voice and agency in informing policies due to the top-down efforts to reform the sector (Setty 2014; Sharma 2019). During the focus group discussions, members asked for the CoP to emerge as a credible source of policy and regulatory guidelines they could rely on. This reflects the dynamic nature of the regulations and constant reform efforts about which teacher educators do not have adequate information, thus rendering them objects of reform (Sharma 2019; Takker and Ramchand 2023). Even while identifying policy advocacy as the least important reason for joining the CoP, 72 per cent of the respondents reported gaining confidence in advocating for policy change. The potential of CoP for transformative action by teacher educators is recognised in the literature (Ping, Schellings, and Beijaard 2018). Changes in entrenched structures and practices can merely be instrumental rather

than transformative (Brody and Hadar 2015; Vann and Bowker 2001)

Conclusion

The challenges that teacher educators face are varied and substantive. While some of them, like academic networking, can be addressed by teacher educators, others, like lack of career growth opportunities, poor status, pay, and working conditions, need systemic interventions. As the teacher educators in this study have indicated, a CoP has the potential to raise shared issues and offers the possibility to address some of their challenges. The country's recent mandate for professional development programs for teacher educators should consider local CoPs as a legitimate avenue of professional development if it is not to become counter-productive by imposing rigid structures and

top-down plans. In this case, the ownership of being a member of the CoP and the experiences of the journey through their involvement in the CoP enabled members to share their expectations from the CoP and chalk out a way forward towards establishing a sustainable CoP. The fact that two-thirds of its members were M.Ed. students and early career teacher educators who were active participants has implications for policy and reform efforts in teacher education, where traditionally, the voices of teacher educators have been marginalised.

This study indicates that virtual CoPs have the potential to modify and bring about learning in a diverse group of people through mutual engagement. The move from mutual engagement toward shared repertoire needs to be studied within different contexts to understand the time, effort, and resources needed.

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