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Collaborative professional practice for strengthening teacher educator identities in Eritrea

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ABSTRACT

Strengthening the identities of teacher educators is critical to quality teacher education and implementing change in the education sector. This study examines the professional identities of Eritrean teacher educators and how these identities can be strengthened through collaborative professional practice in a challenging context currently under reform. The focus is on the professional capacity building activities at the College of Education in Eritrea, which were implemented in collaboration with Finnish education partners. The paper reports on findings from an action-research informed study of a semester-long series of professional development seminars and an interview study with individual teacher educators. The qualitative content analyses of seminar participants' drawings, evaluations and interview data focus on: 1) identifying critical issues that support the formation of teacher educator identities, and 2) understanding how collaborative practice at the institutional level can support the strengthening of professional identities. The findings point to potential ways of creating critical collegueship and more purposeful, contextually relevant approaches for professional development in teacher education. The need for strengthening the identities of teacher educators' through bottom-up processes and in collaboration with international partners is highlighted.

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Introduction

The indispensable role of teacher education in educational reforms has received increasing attention in educational research on Sub-Saharan African contexts where the low relevance of teacher education programmes in relation to the requirements of the teaching profession remains a key challenge for quality education (e.g. Kwenda and Robinson 2010; O'Sullivan 2010; Akyeampong 2017). Teacher educators are challenged to develop professionally, to adapt their professional roles, and to remodify their professional identities through negotiating their personal motivations while satisfying the requirements of the society for educational reforms (Samuel and Stephens 2000; Westheimer 2009). Our research follows previous calls to better account for the contextual

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realities when developing teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (O'Sullivan 2010; Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett 2011) by offering a practice-oriented analysis of teacher educators' identity formation in the context of Eritrea in the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea, the second youngest independent state in Africa, can be characterised as a post-liberation state with a strong nation-building agenda. The education system is structured to serve national development objectives leaving a little room for institutional autonomy (e.g. Müller 2018; Riggan 2020). The Eritrean Government has stated teacher education development is its top priority in the education sector to meet the critical need for qualified teachers in the country (UNESCO/Ministry of Education Eritrea 2015). The practice of steering the lowest performing students to teacher education is among the critical quality issues in teacher education development nationally (Hailemariam, Ogbay, and White 2010).

This study took place at the Eritrea Institute of Technology's College of Education (CoE), where the country's middle and secondary school teachers were prepared at the time of study. Each of us researchers have worked in and/or collaborated with the institution and its successor, the Asmara College of Education. Resources for staff professional development and pedagogics are extremely scarce which has resulted in the replication of teacher-centred school teaching methods in higher teacher education (Posti-Ahokas, Meriläinen, and Westman 2018; Tsegay, Zegergish, and Ashraf 2018). As teacher educator practices are central for the development of exemplary pedagogies among prospective teachers (Akyeampong 2017; Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett 2011), this replication arguably hinders the reform attempts to implementing more learner-centred pedagogies throughout the education system (Tadesse et al. 2020). In this context, navigating and negotiating shared meanings about the teaching profession is of critical importance for developing teacher identities during initial teacher education (Cross and Ndofirepi 2015).

Since 2015, the Governments of Eritrea and Finland have facilitated partnerships with Finnish Universities and educational organisations to support institutional capacity development as a response to the challenges identified above. At the College of education, the partnership was initiated during intense reform initiatives, widely discussed in a Research Scoping Workshop in May 2015 to prioritise research themes of the college together with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, educators and academics in the country. Among the outcomes of the workshop was the focus on how teachers are educated to meaningfully influence the quality of the education system. The nature, preparation, and motivation of teacher educators was put in spotlight. In line with the institutional strategic objectives, the focus of the partnership was on developing and researching ways to enhance teacher educators' collaborative professional development by creating a culture of critical collegiality (Lord 1994; Kintz et al. 2015). For us authors, representing the college leadership, leaders of the international projects and junior colleagues interested in research, conducting joint research provided a concrete opportunity to realise the partnership as academics affiliated with the same institution at the time.

Our exploratory study of teacher educators' identity formation and collaborative professional development in a challenging context focuses on analysing the teacher educators' experiences of a series of bi-weekly professional development seminars 'Educators' Forums' over one semester, jointly facilitated by Eritrean and Finnish educators. We collected sets of qualitative data, including drawings and participant evaluations,

throughout the Educator's Forum series, in order to inform seminar development. Ten interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding on individual identity formation. For this paper, a qualitative content analyses of the drawings, participant evaluations and individual interviews were conducted to: 1) identify critical issues related to teacher educator identity formation at the CoE, and 2) understand how collaborative professional practice at institutional level can strengthen teacher educators' identities. The focus was placed on identifying and developing contextually relevant means to support the strengthening of teacher educators' identities and to enhance professional development through collaborative practice.

Sociocultural formation of teacher educator identities

Our study is rooted in an understanding of identity, whether personal or professional, as lived and fundamentally entailing both the self and the surrounding context and, thus, being more complex than a mere personal trait or role (Wenger 1998). Teacher educators form their identities 'in context, in practice and over time' (Dinkelman 2011, 314). Here, we utilised the description of professional identity as a part of an individual's unity, where working life, community and sociocultural context build frames and opportunities for action (e.g. Havnes and Semby 2014). In regard to this, our study cannot be separated from the strong nation-building agenda steering teacher education and teacher educator identity formation in Eritrea. Previous research on education in Eritrea has pointed to secondary and higher education as spaces where conflicting beliefs about national duty and personal aspirations are particularly influential (Riggan 2013; Müller 2018), and can too be traced to this study.

Our analysis of the teacher educator identity is guided by questions regarding the strength of a teacher's role among other academic professional roles as well as motivation for professional development as an educator (Nevgi and Toom 2011). In the context of the present study, both the students and faculty at the CoE suffer from the identity effects of teacher education's low college-level status and low profession-level attractiveness (Hailemariam, Ogbay, and White 2010). Hence, we argue paying more attention to the imbalance between the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning to teach is critical (e.g. Malm 2009). To allow this connection to emerge, we adopted creative techniques and dialogic approaches for the seminars that are explored in this research.

Teachers' satisfaction with their work and collegial relationships has been found to correlate with their self-efficacy, motivation and commitment to their work, which in turn have all been identified as indicators of professional identity (Canrinus et al. 2012). The formation of professional identity through an enhanced sense of belonging and commitment is supported by creating and maintaining meaningful, interactive professional relationships with other members of the work community (e.g. Izadinia 2014; Canrinus et al. 2012). Deepening one's self-perception as a professional through finding one's own role in the professional community and internalising the profession is further linked to the individual's preparedness and willingness to make changes, both personally and professionally, and thus impact the culture of one's work community (Havnes and Semby 2014). Although space for critical bottom-up development and culture of collaboration among teacher educators are rather limited in Eritrea, many teacher educators have built

sustained connections to schools and the surrounding communities through teaching practice, research and voluntary activities. Therefore, it is important to recognise these as part of the community context of identity formation.

Creation of professional learning communities through collaborative practice and reflection is challenged by the 'egg-crate' institutional structure, daily schedules and multiple, conflicting demands on teachers (Westheimer 2009). Drawing on Lord's (1994) model of critical collegueship, Westheimer (2009) argues for the importance of open, meaningful discussion in a trustful environment. According to this model, critical collegueship development requires teachers: 1) to be open to discuss conflicting views about teaching, 2) to increase their comfort with ambiguity, and 3) to have collective generativity and commitment to continue working together amidst ambiguity and conflict. Taking a critical collegial stance presupposes moving beyond sharing of ideas to confronting both one's own and colleagues' traditional practices (Kintz et al. 2015). In this study, the notion of critical collegueship assisted us in the conceptualisation of the objectives of the professional development activities at the CoE, as well as in the subsequent analyses of the process from the perspectives of participating faculty – both as individuals and as a professional learning community.

Exploratory study of teacher educator identities at the college of education

This study was conducted as an integral part of the Educators' Forum series implemented in the context of new international partnership with Finland. Each of the five seminars gathered between 25–40 faculty members together bi-weekly to concentrate on research-based content of teacher educator identity, quality of teaching and learning, pedagogies for active learning and continuous professional development. Aiming at enhancing a collaborative culture for professional development, the seminars were initiated as an open, collaborative process among the faculty who had expressed interest in further training on higher education pedagogy and professional development in general. Participatory, learner-centred techniques were modelled throughout the seminars.

An exploratory research approach (Stebbins 2001) was adopted to create space for genuine dialogue and to build trust towards the research element included in the professional development activity. We made use of the concatenated exploration throughout the process by triangulating different sets of data and analysing it from diverse perspectives. With the aim of improving practice in a contextually relevant manner and from within the institution, principles of action research and self-study were adopted to develop ownership and agency of all participant educators (Cuenca 2010; Loughran 2014; Idris et al. 2020). Recognising the hesitation of the staff towards activities implemented in collaboration with newly arrived international colleagues, we gave particular attention to equal division of responsibilities between the two local and two international researcher-facilitators, and introduction of the seminars as a regular activity of the college. Three of the authors were responsible for planning and facilitating the seminars, while one author conducted the individual interviews.

The inquiry was guided by ethical considerations protecting the anonymity and dignity of each participant. During the first seminar, the Dean of the college made clear to the participants that the process was subject to research with the aim of improving CoE

professional development practices. Participation in the seminars was separated from participating in the research by agreeing that participants would only return their drawings and evaluations if they allowed it to be used as research material anonymously. The ten individuals interviewed provided a written consent for research. Following action research principles, the preliminary findings were brought back to the participants in subsequent sessions for further discussion and development. We were conscious of the sensitive position of the participants as well as our dual-positioning as researchers yet simultaneously as collaborators, throughout the research process from planning to publication of findings.

Research participants

The participants consist of the 41 teacher educators, 31 male and 10 female, who participated in the Educators' Forum. Their attendance varied between the sessions. At the time of the study, the majority of teaching staff at the college held a Bachelor's degree in education or in the teaching subjects (e.g. biology, mathematics, history, English). Due to shortage of staff, almost all the colleges in Eritrea were recruiting increasing numbers of graduate assistants to adopt teaching positions. One fifth of staff were Master's degree holders and only 4 held a Doctoral degree.

The interviewed 10 teacher educators represented different career profiles. Eight had 5–10 years of previous teaching experience from different levels of education, whereas one had taught for over 10 years and one less than five years before joining the college. A majority were relatively new to the role of a teacher educator; eight had worked in the College for less than five years.

In the findings section, the staff members who participated in the Educators' Forum are referred to as participants (N = 41). The selected quotations represent the ideas commonly present in the data. To complement the collective voice, individuals who were interviewed are cited with more length.

Process of data collection and analysis

The first data set was collected in the first seminar session through a drawing exercise inspired by Nevgi's (2007) study conducted in a Finnish university context. The activities consisted of individual drawing, pair sharing, as well as group and general discussion, lasting one hour in total. The drawing was guided as follows:

Close your eyes and let your mind rest. Then, draw a picture of yourself as a teacher. Use the symbols and images that arise in your mind. When the drawing is ready, study it and reflect on what kind of a teacher it represents. What elements have you used? Why? What seems important to you?

After individual work was completed, the participants interpreted each other's drawings and shared their ideas in pairs and in groups. A general discussion was conducted after the exercise and continued during the next seminar to further analyse the drawings and share ideas about various identities. For the purposes of the present study, the 12 drawings returned by participants willing to share their work with us were analysed collaboratively.

Following the third and the last seminar, the participants were asked to reflect on their learning and to provide written feedback to the facilitators. The individual, anonymously filled feedback forms (N = 41) were subsequently used for a content analysis. The focus was on analysing the value the participants gave to collaborative learning.

In conjunction with the seminars, 10 semi-structured thematic interviews, focusing on professional identity, personal engagement and motivation, and professional learning in the working context were conducted with the educators to gain an individual perspective on their identity formation.

We combined the three sets of data, including drawings of teacher self-images, participant evaluations and individual interviews for the analysis. The analysis of identity formation is based on the drawings and the interview data, whereas the theme of collaborative professional development was analysed mainly through participant feedback from the seminars, complemented by the interview data. We analysed the drawings and participant feedback collaboratively in two stages. First, a preliminary analysis was conducted immediately after the seminar session to bring back the findings to the participants and to guide planning of the following session. A more detailed content analysis was conducted for this paper. The drawings were analysed as representations of teacher educator identities (Nevgi 2007), where the participants' own verbal explanations and interpretations during the seminar greatly assisted us. The drawings were then categorised into three groups, according to their respective focuses on identity, teacher practice and teacher qualities.

A qualitative content analysis of transcribed interview recordings (from 23 to 90 minutes) was conducted using Atlas.ti software by the interviewer. The data were organised under main categories of 'strengthening factors' and 'external challenges and internal tensions'. For this paper, the findings from the 'strengthening factors' category analysis were further developed and divided into further subcategories of 'community-driven factors' and 'self-driven factors' in collaboration with the team (Figure 2). Finally, the participant evaluations were analysed in detail to identify and categorise the learning outcomes mentioned by the participants. Categories of 'practices', 'theoretical concepts', 'students' perspective', 'development of own teacher identity', 'teacher's perspective' and 'colleagueship' were formed. In this paper, we present a more detailed analysis of the outcomes related to colleagueship.

Findings

Formation of teacher educators' identities

The drawing exercise was received with curiosity by the participants. Although the participants were guided to use only images, the majority included written explanations as well. Many were uncomfortable with drawing as they felt it was not their strongest skill. This may partly explain the relatively low return rate (30%) of the drawings.

The drawing (Figure 1), which is presented as an example, depicts the dimensions of a teacher educator's self-identity. This teacher likes ones work, masters both subject knowledge and pedagogy, and acknowledges the current global thinking and requirements to



Figure 1. 'Me as a Teacher'.

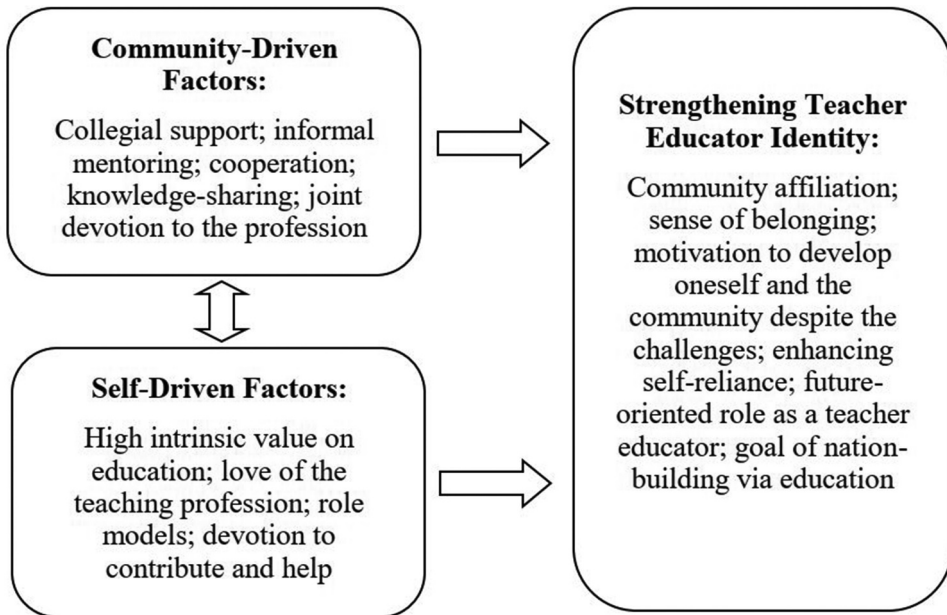


Figure 2. Factors strengthening the teacher educator identity formation.

use information and communication technology. In addition, he supports and provides counselling to his students. Furthermore, he recognises the need for continuous professional development.

In this research, professional identity is perceived a dynamic, complex concept tied to a specific moment and context. The drawing exercise encouraged imagining such self-narrative and stimulated the educators to realise the discrepancy between their actual and ideal practice. Several drawings depicted discomfort but also showed that teacher educators are motivated to shape-up, so that they can generate behavioural and attitudinal changes necessary for becoming good teachers. Through the drawings, the educators depicted their pedagogy needs to fit within the national context, reflecting Eritrean school teachers' critical stance in implementing reforms towards learner-centred pedagogy with limited resources and professional space (Tadesse et al. 2020). Some drawings depicted teachers who feel unhappy and incompetent. The reasons given for this included inadequate proficiency in the instruction medium (English), insufficient pedagogical skills and a lack of exposure to research and pedagogical training.

To complement the views provided through drawings, factors that strengthen teacher educator identity were identified in the interview data and divided into partly overlapping subcategories of 'community-driven factors' and 'self-driven factors'. These together support the teacher educators' identity formation as depicted in Figure 2.

High intrinsic value for education and personal respect for the teaching profession were supporting the teacher educators' identity formation and professional development, despite the vast challenges they face. The respondents expressed a devotion to contribute to their people and nation, thereby expanding their self-perception to include being a part of a greater mission beyond their work environment. Those factors were found to clarify and strengthen their educator identity.

Collegial support played a significant role in building a sense of belonging to the teacher education community and in forming the educators' professional identities (e.g. Izadinia 2014; Goodwin et al. 2014; cf. Wenger 1998). The necessity of cooperation and sharing of ideas was further emphasised due to the challenging nature of teacher educator's work:

– We do the job in cooperation with the other teachers in here. We are not going to do the job lonely [alone], because ... as I told you before, the job is not easy. – You need to have, uh, help, or, uh, cooperate. (Educator 4, over five years of teaching experience, under five as a teacher educator)

Members of the work community were highly valued. The educators considered their colleagues share a high commitment to work together amidst the ambiguity and challenges they face in their context, placing more value on group affiliation and being part of a devoted community. Support from senior teachers appeared to influence junior teachers' perception of their place in the new teacher educator community, assisting their professional development and further motivating them to learn more (e.g. Izadinia 2014).

– I'm constantly, you know, meeting them [colleagues and other seniors], facing them, asking them this and that, uh, I believe it, it will help me one day ... you know, they are doctors, I believe they passed a long journey to reach this status and then, by, by talking to them, by

sharing ideas with them, can, actually not can, uh, help me to, to develop my profession and to become future expert. (Educator 5, under five years of teaching experience, under five as a teacher educator)

The interviewees regarded education as an instrument for bringing change. The teacher educators thought of themselves as having a central role in ensuring the quality of future teachers who would shape the future, reflecting both their personal endeavours and the national agenda (cf. Samuel and Stephens 2000).

– The quality of this, uh, [future teachers] that we are teaching in this college depends on the quality of the lectures or the teacher educators here. – I really appreciate one proverb from the Finnish experts, uh, ‘I teach means I touch the future’. – Teachers are given the highest responsibility to shape the future. – So we’re in some way slowing the future improvements if we don’t give the correct and the exact commitment to improving the teachers’ quality in many aspects. (Educator 9, ten years of teaching experience, under five as a teacher educator)

This related to the discussion of the teaching profession as a form of devotion and their value-based reasons for engaging in the profession. Despite the compromised know-how and inadequate professional resources, the majority of the interviewees stated they love teaching and over half claimed becoming a teacher had been a long-term dream for them.

Teacher educators’ ideal selves and their professional development objectives

The drawing (Figure 3) depicts the teacher educator as a possessor of knowledge, books and experience, aiding to move forward as a knowledge provider, a guide and a moulder. Again, the orientation here is towards an education professional who is committed to



Figure 3. Qualities of a Good Teacher.

continuous self-development. In their drawings, the participants portrayed themselves as result- and achievement-oriented, viewing their efforts as crucial for upbringing visionary students for the society. In addition, curiosity towards new methods was seen having an important role in the creation of conducive learning environments. Moreover, a positive approach towards learners and learning was described as the right way forward in improving one's own pedagogy. The educators' emphasised their own agency amidst contextual challenges

I should be the one who alleviates the problem rather than dumping the blames to others ... solution comes only if I embrace the reality of myself. (Participant 39)

The data strongly reflected the teacher educators' clear visions of the directions they want to develop towards. These entailed methodological and technical skills, such as developing research skills, pedagogical know-how and content-based knowledge, but also more humane and personal skills, such as being ethical, supportive, friendly, collaborative and visionary. These are all in accordance with the pedagogical preferences of the Eritrean College students, who challenged their teachers to break the barriers for improved student participation (Tsegay, Zegergish, and Ashraf 2018).

The high intrinsic value assigned to the teaching profession impacted the way in which the educators responded to their experiences of teacher education. High personal appreciation contributes to building a more positive self-perception and to overriding one's dissatisfaction with poor working conditions (Canrinus et al. 2012). Consequently, the interviewed teacher educators perceived the contextual challenges to be worth overcoming and their mission worth fighting for.

To summarise, the individual educators shared a symbolic view of the teacher educator as an agent of human resource development (cf. Samuel and Stephens 2000). The educators' devotion to their profession and to the mission of shaping the future reflects the interwoven relationships between themselves, their community and the sociocultural context. Their professional identities are thus inseparable from their practical work, their community, and the personal and social meaning placed on their profession (e.g. Wenger 1998), resulting in potential tensions between personal aspirations and serving the common good.

Collegial support and practice for strengthening teacher educator identities

Analysing the seminar participants' critical learning experiences during the seminars and their suggestions for improving professional development activities, the 41 participants identified a total of 99 learning outcomes from the seminars. Over half of the responses (58%) referred to more in-depth conceptions of learning and teaching processes, as well as to a range of appropriate teaching methods, and learner-centred pedagogies for educating future teachers.

The value given to collegiality in pedagogical development was mentioned 10 times. The drawing exercise presented at the Educators' Forum stimulated the teacher educators to reflect on their approaches to the teaching-learning process and generated lively discussions on their teaching challenges and triumphs. The discussion subsequent

to the drawing activity showed that drawing enhanced self-understanding and awareness of the various roles that they hold, and the ideal qualities and practices of a teacher educator.

The Educators' Forum enabled interactions of diverse views regarding learning and teaching. One participant stated: 'The mode of organization is really good because it is giving more room to us' (Participant 36), reflecting an appreciation of the interactive, non-authoritarian approach utilised in the seminars. The participants appreciated the creation of encouraging environment and being able to share diverse interpretations with colleagues. The hierarchical gap between the senior and novice staff was an apparent constraint to creating a collegial community – reflecting the high social roles of the elderly prevalent in the Eritrean society. However, some participants seemed wary of presenting diverse views, stating the facilitators should not generalise based on the varying comments and suggestions of participants:

The organisers ... should be focused and not to accept all responses as right ones. (Participant 11, underlined by the participant)

At the same time, the value of each individual educator's experience was emphasised:

Try to approach everyone ... because everyone has a diamond which you need (helpful) for the program. (Participant 4)

The feedback was reflective of both appreciation and navigation of contrasting views, and the experienced tensions can be viewed as an indication of the seminars being a space for creating critical collegiality (Lord 1994), where colleagues support each other in growing as teacher educators.

What can be drawn from these evaluations is that the process of organising workshops or seminars on the learning and teaching process requires high contextual sensitivity and awareness of challenges of international partnerships related to power asymmetries and crossing cultural barriers (see Carbonnier and Kontinen 2015). Even though the rare gathering of educators at the CoE around issues of pedagogy was appreciated by many, the participants reminded us that the seminars were happening amidst their rather busy schedules. The findings show the teacher educators acknowledged the need for continuous professional development. Therefore, the activity analysed in this paper seems justified as an initial response to the strategic objective of the institution to enhance quality through pedagogical transformation. However, expectations towards the new international partnerships could not be fully met through this kind of activity. This critique will be discussed in the concluding section.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings reveal a mismatch between the actual and ideal teacher educator identities, practices and qualities, as presented in the drawn self-images and the interviews. Concurring with earlier research (e.g. Izadinia 2014; Goodwin et al. 2014; Wenger 1998), collective, community-driven factors contributed significantly to the Eritrean teacher educators' sense of belonging to the community, to their motivation towards the profession and, consequently, to their professional identity formation. In contrast to the expressed low social value of the teaching profession, the national rhetoric presenting a

symbolic view of a teacher as an agent of national development was found to be one of the most outstanding self- and community-driven factors, strengthening the Eritrean educators' identity formation.

The teacher educators individually and collectively expressed a notably positive attitude, hope and intrinsic motivation towards their work. In their mission of shaping the future, the educators' identities were highly future-oriented and interwoven with belonging to the community, reflecting ideals of pragmatic education and nation building through education in Eritrea. However, the conflicting beliefs between national duty and personal aspirations present in the resource-deprived Eritrean education system (Müller 2018; Riggan 2013) became visible in the teacher educator interviews that presented accounts of limited individual agency and aspirational space. Teacher educators need to be everything at the same time, and their failure means transferring deficiencies to new generations, which is why the profession comes to be seen as a depository of good will. Their identity formation is thus facing a transformation to the idea of 'devotion' filled with abundant and complex meanings that in reality seem to defy the actual processes. If not offered the resources and spaces to practice the diverse roles expected from them, the teacher educators might end up having subjugated and complex professional identities that would further impede their professional development.

The limited arrangements for college-specific professional development and mentoring schemes that meaningfully engage senior and junior staff members seemed to hinder the creation of learning communities at the college. This study has drawn insights from an initial series of seminars in order to identify approaches that can be used for systematising professional development among teacher educators. The seminar series succeeded in creating space for evidence-based modelling of learner centred practice, collegial discussion and sharing of diverse views on professional topics, which can be seen as indications of developing critical collegiality (Lord 1994; Kintz et al. 2015). The discussions showed how breaking off from current structures and pedagogical culture, which are not necessarily helpful in enacting the aspired images of learning and teaching nor in creating appreciation for the complexity of teacher education, still remains a challenge (cf. Tsegay, Zegergish, and Ashraf 2018; Posti-Ahokas, Meriläinen, and Westman 2018).

The college had an imperative of developing capabilities and motivation of staff, particularly lower degree-holders, to improve the process of teaching and learning, and to make up for limited in-service training and the backlog of further study opportunities. During the seminars, staff members had eager questions on how the series could support in securing formal further study opportunities in universities abroad, as there are no opportunities for Master's or Doctoral level study inside the country. Since the beginning of the Eritrea-Finland partnership, working towards joint approaches to Master's and Doctoral training has been expressed as a priority. In what ways this expectation of further education, not realised for all, clouds the commitment of those educators, requires further examination. Formal certification of staff should be considered seriously as it defines the staffs' professional positions and economic standing both within the college community and in the society. The limited power of the college on deciding on the nature and direction of academic certification modalities continues to be a critical challenge. In retrospect, the seminar series would have been more critically relevant to participants if it had focused on building a more explicit link to these further opportunities. This apparent

gap in expectations further emphasised the importance of engaging all partners at each stage of collaboration, and the need to build long-term partnerships between academic institutions (see Carbonnier and Kontinen 2015; Asare et al. 2020).

While the adopted research approach offered us valuable help to improve practice immediately, the inclusion of the research component in the seminar series did result in some participants questioning the aim of the activities. We also need to acknowledge the sociocultural context where the hierarchal nature of the state arguably impedes with open expression of controversial issues and conflicting views. Moreover, while our position as researchers and as institutional and project leaders might have welcomed reflections and challenging of the professional norms, it may have also led to cultural misinterpretations, sugar-coating and defensive responses. The latter comes with an emphasis on the public nature of the teacher educators' work compressed with the national expectations, which allegedly affects the situation of the participants and hence our research. Further, in North-South cooperation, questions of cultural locatedness of knowledge are arguably present (e.g. Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020). Despite these tensions, the encouraging feedback we received when bringing back our findings to the participants in several research seminars indicates that the analysis did capture and voice some of the key concerns of Eritrean teacher educators. Encouraging more educators to co-organise, lead and co-facilitate the forums based on issues that could be developed and matured together with the Finnish experts may have created a stronger sense of ownership among the college community.

The findings support previous calls for intentional preparation of teacher educators in developing the knowledge for, in and of the practice of teacher educating (e.g. Goodwin et al. 2014; Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett 2011). A more purposeful preparation of teacher educators and a creation of collaborative learning communities are required to strengthen teacher educators' identities. While working towards formalised training of teacher educators, the roles of practitioner research and reflective practice can greatly contribute to teacher educators' professional development and an integration of their field with the complex sociocultural circumstances of their work (e.g. Izadinia 2014; O'Sullivan 2010). Self-driven professional development activities aimed at cultivating a strong teacher education identity and improvement of practice should be further explored. Our findings also show the CoE teacher educators have clear visions of where they want to develop. We see the joint objective to be to create a learning community that can benefit from its staff's diverse knowledge and experience through critical collegueship.

Our study has shown how creating space for teacher educators' professional identity formation that allow for the development of one's own work and for the participation in professional discussions through reflective practices and collaborative learning communities is critical. The processes of change in teacher education and in educational development in general ought to take into consideration the knowledge, motivations, needs and views of teacher educators themselves in order to create relevant, sustained change and renewal. This is particularly important in order to align policy goals, vision and ideals of what the education system should be doing with the scarce resources (Riggan 2020). Due consideration for the work by teacher educators in reaching out to schools and communities (e.g. Idris et al. 2020) could potentially become a source of motivation and meaning by creating the connections between the self, the institution and the society.

Research collaboration, especially when initiated from the South, can become a significant space for institutional learning and improvement and an opportunity to decolonise institutional partnerships (Asare et al. 2020; Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020). The partnerships with Finnish institutions have allowed exposure to Finnish education through joint seminars, workshops, research and visits to Eritrea and Finland. Our experiences of collaboration at the CoE re-emphasise the importance of sustained partnerships, purposeful induction and institutionalised research in creating a stimulating culture for collaborative professional development and mutual learning (see also Posti-Ahokas, Meriläinen, and Westman 2018; Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020). Identifying and developing successful approaches to professional development requires further research.

The restructuring of Eritrean higher education institutions has paradoxical implications; while the college has ostensibly secured greater institutional autonomy, the continuity of the initiated professional development schemes and partnerships seem more uncertain. Further, since the time of the activities analysed in this paper, the global pandemic has heavily challenged all forms of international collaboration. Exploring novel practices and new forms of partnerships will be of great importance. Only through sustained effort can the teacher educators realise their full, much needed, potential of being the agents of change in their field and society.

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