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Uncovering a hidden professional agenda for teacher educators: A mixed method study on Flemish teacher educators and their professional development

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ABSTRACT

Taking into account the pressing need to understand more about what teacher educators' professional development characterises, this article adopts a mixed method approach to explore Flemish (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) teacher educators' professional development needs and opportunities. Analysis results of a large-scale survey study with 611 teacher educators and analysis of five qualitative focus groups (with 24 teacher educators) are presented. The results confirm the lack of attention for teacher educators' professional development in the Flemish teacher education system. Moreover, the findings indicate a structural need for participation in professional development activities that are linked to teacher educators' own practices, organised as long-term sustainable professional development trajectories, and formally recognised. To conclude, a professional development agenda for research, policy and practices related to teacher educators' professional development is discussed.

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Teacher education; teacher educators; professional development; mixed method study

1. Introduction

Teacher educators – or those who teach the teachers – were until recently described as 'hidden professionals' (Livingston 2014, 219) and 'an under-researched and poorly understood occupational group' (Murray 2005, 68), 'who do not always get the support and challenge they need, for example in terms of their education and professional development' (European Commission 2013, 4). Despite their vital role in the education and support of (future) teachers, research literature and policy documents on who teacher educators are and how they professionally develop remained scarce until the end of the twentieth century (Czerniawski, MacPhail, and Guberman 2017; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014; Murray and Harrison 2008). In addition, central policies related to quality requirements and professional development requirements for teacher educators were mostly lacking or under-developed (European Commission 2013).

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Over the past two decades, however, researchers, policy-makers and teacher educators themselves started to increasingly recognise the specific nature of teacher educators' work, and, correspondingly, started to focus on teacher educators' professional development (e.g. Berry 2016; European Commission 2013; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014; Lunenberg et al. 2017; Smith 2015; Vanassche et al. 2015). In this respect, there seems to be a friction between the limited attention given to teacher educators' preparation, induction and on-going professional development, and the growing need expressed by teacher educators themselves to engage in professional development initiatives related to their role as a teacher educator (Czerniawski, MacPhail, and Guberman 2017).

On an international level, considerable differences between countries prioritising teacher educators' professional development can be noted (European Commission 2013; Vanassche et al. 2015). The growing S-STEP community largely rooted in the United States (Loughran et al. 2004), the MOFET institute in Israel (Golan and Reichenberg 2015), and the NAFOL research school in Norway are pioneers in taking steps towards a more formal recognition of teacher educators' professional development. In most European countries, however, and as for instance in the Netherlands, England and Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), teacher educators' professional development largely relies on more 'ad hoc' and 'local' initiatives (Vanassche et al. 2015).

Building on the results of a large-scale mixed method study, the present paper aims to advance insight into how Flemish teacher educators' professional development in general, and their professional development opportunities and needs in particular. First, the background of the study is presented, offering a brief literature review on teacher educators' professional development and a description of the Flemish teacher education context. Second, the findings of the large-scale mixed method are presented. Based on the main findings, a professional development agenda for research, policy and practice is discussed, interesting for all European stakeholders who aim to further improve and develop the teacher educator profession.

2. State of the art

2.1. Teacher educators: a heterogeneous and unique occupational group

Teacher educators are defined by the European Commission (2013, 8) as 'all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of student teachers and teachers'. This definition is not limited to professionals in higher education who focus on course work, didactics and pedagogy; it means that all professionals responsible for the instruction and supervision of future teachers, all mentors responsible for the support of teachers, and all other professionals involved in the preparation and support of (student) teachers are teacher educators (European Commission 2013; Shagrir 2010). In this respect, the European Commission's (2013) definition acknowledges the increased diversification of 'teacher educators' as an occupational group. It recognises that teacher educators are a group of professionals who can differ significantly from one another in several ways, for example, qualification level (bachelor's degree, master's degree, PhD), (subject) area of specialism, work experience (teachers, lecturers, researchers), contractual arrangements and institutional constraints. Moreover, the definition encompasses a wide spectrum of positions in the educational system, ranging from institution-based teacher educators to school-based teacher educators.

Institution-based teacher educators are occupied in tertiary pre-service teacher education programmes and are mainly responsible for the preparation of future teachers. School-based teacher educators, also called ‘mentors’ or ‘workplace facilitators’, are occupied in schools and mainly responsible for the on-going support of serving teachers and for facilitating learning of (student) teachers in the workplace (European Commission 2013). Clear (task) definitions, however, on this particular group of teacher educators are absent in the literature, and differ per country and context (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). On the one hand, research on school-based teacher educators (Bullough 2005; Livingston 2014) suggests that school-based teacher educators primarily identify themselves with their continuing role as a teacher in the contexts of PK-12 education (i.e. kindergarten, primary education and secondary education). In most cases, only a small part of school-based teacher educators’ tasks consists of supporting teachers, and thus being a teacher educator (Bullough 2005). On the other hand, research on institution-based teacher educators (Berry 2007; Loughran 2006; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014; Murray and Male 2005) suggests a unique and complex identity ‘shift’ when one becomes a teacher educator in higher education. The main challenges related to one’s transition into higher education involve developing a professional identity as a teacher educator, learning new institutional norms and roles, working with adult learners, and becoming a researcher (Murray and Male 2005). This ‘shift’ is also widely acknowledged in the research literature as ‘moving from being first-order practitioners – that is, school teachers – to being second-order practitioners’ (Murray and Male 2005, 126).

In line with Cochran-Smith (2003), we agree that both groups of teacher educators (i.e. school-based teacher educators and institution-based teacher educators) provide significant contributions across the continuum of teacher education, but that they require different approaches in terms of their professional development (Cochran-Smith 2003; Livingston 2014). This paper focuses on institution-based teacher educators (subsequently referred to as ‘teacher educators’), also the largest group of teacher educators in Europe (European Commission 2013; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014).

2.2. Teacher educators’ professional development: not operating in a vacuum

There are little systematic routes for teacher educators’ professional development (Smith 2003), and teacher educators’ induction into teacher education and their further professional development is seldom supported by in-service formal professional development activities (European Commission 2013; Loughran 2014; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). In line with Czerniawski, MacPhail, and Guberman (2017), Kelchtermans (2013), Lunenberg et al. (2017) and Vanassche et al. (2015) we believe that a teacher educators’ actual practice should be the starting point in conceptualising teacher educators’ professional development. Teacher educators’ practice is always situated in multiple contexts, which include but are not limited to institutions of higher education, cooperating schools, and national and international policies regarding teacher educators’ work and professional development (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014; Vanassche et al. 2015). Understanding these contexts is critical to any understanding of teacher educators’ professional development, as they inevitably influence one’s professional development needs and opportunities (Czerniawski, MacPhail, and Guberman 2017; Vanassche et al. 2015).

On an international level, the increased attention on teacher educators' professional development is reflected in several reports of the European Commission (2012, 2013). Similarly, in 2013, the International Forum for Teacher Educator Development (InFo-TED) was founded. The general aim of this recently established forum is to bring together people across the world to exchange research and practice related to teacher educators' professional development (see Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde 2017; Lunenberg et al. 2017; Vanassche et al. 2015).

Several national initiatives specifically focussing on teacher educators' professional development have also been initiated across Europe (see Vanassche et al. 2015 for a comparison of initiatives in Norway, Ireland and Belgium). In Norway, the Norwegian National Graduate School in Teacher Education (NAFOL) helps teacher educators to gain a doctorate (Smith 2015). In Israel, the MOFET Institute, a unique national centre that supports teacher educators' professional development, was established. While supporting the development of teacher educators' research expertise, both initiatives also contribute to the development of the knowledge base on teacher education and the further development of the teacher educator profession (Ben-Peretz et al. 2013; Smith 2015; Vanassche et al. 2015). In other countries, systematic and formal initiatives focusing on teacher educators' induction and professional education have been lacking (Goodwin et al. 2014; Murray and Harrison 2008). In some countries, however, professional standards or profiles for teacher educators (Professional Standard of Teacher Educators, the Netherlands; Standards for Teacher Educators, USA; the Flemish Teacher Educator Development Profile, Flanders, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) have been developed. In common, these documents describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes teacher educators need in order to function effectively. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the Dutch National Teacher Education Association (VELON) has developed a professional accreditation system with a professional portfolio. This accreditation system functions as a self-assessment tool and a tool that can be implemented by teacher education institutions as an instrument to guarantee the quality of their programmes (Lunenberg et al. 2017). It is clear that these different and distinctive national contexts clearly affect teacher educators' professional development opportunities.

Furthermore, institutional contexts, and institutions of higher education in particular, play a significant role in teacher educators' professional development (Berry 2016; Smith 2003; Vanassche 2014). The institutional context is likely to enable and constrain different aspects of teacher educators' work (Zeichner 2002). Particularly, given the lack of a clear policy on teacher educators' professional development, teacher educators' professional development largely relies – in addition to individual agency in one's own professional development – on chance, goodwill, and support from the teacher education institution (Berry 2016; Smith 2003). In this respect, Vanassche (2014) argues that the context of the teacher education institution with its particular structural and cultural working conditions mediates teacher educators' professional work and thus their professional development opportunities. Berry (2007, 52) emphasises that the following conditions in the teacher education institution were crucial for her own professional development process as a teacher educator: 'adequate resources in terms of time, funds and the availability of experienced personnel who can work as supportive colleagues with less experienced staff'. The micro communities of practice within these already diverse institutional contexts are also shaping teacher educators' work and professional development (Murray 2008). In other words, in addition to (inter)national influences, the context in the teacher education institution will affect teacher educators' professional development (Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde 2017).

Moreover, teacher educators are inevitably connected to many other complex networks of different groups and individuals. These groups include, for instance, educational policy-makers, research communities, subject discipline associations, teachers and students in schools (Berry 2016). These different networks will also give meaning to teacher educators' experiences and define particular needs regarding their professional development (Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde 2017).

In their recent review study of international research on teacher educators, Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen (2014) found – at least – six professional roles that teacher educators have to fulfil: teacher of teachers, researcher, coach, curriculum developer, gatekeeper, and broker. It is apparent the two first roles ('teacher of teachers' and 'researcher') are the most important ones in supporting the (further) professional development of teacher educators (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). In this respect, several authors (Dinkelman 2003; Loughran 2014; Zeichner 2005) argue that during teacher educators' career, there should be a focus on conducting research about one's own practice as a teacher of teachers (practitioner research) to promote scholarship as the basis of teacher educators' functioning along the different roles (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). It is clear that teacher educators do not fulfil all these roles at one moment in their career; nor do these roles belong to specific career phases (Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde 2017). Instead, they need to be perceived as sub-identities, related to the (different) contexts teacher educators are working in and the different relationships teacher educators have (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2013).

Finally, we can also build on the agency of teacher educators themselves in their own professional development. In this respect, a growing number of teacher educators are involved in various forms of practice-oriented research (Cochran-Smith 2003) to develop knowledge of their practice and make tacit aspects of their practice explicit to their student teachers, to other teacher educators and the broader community in teacher education (see for instance, Tack and Vanderlinde 2016a, 2016b; Vanassche 2014). The Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP), one of the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) largest Special Interest Groups (SIGs), is a visible sign of the growing group of teacher educators engaged in research on their own practice (Cochran-Smith 2005).

3. The Flemish context

In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, as in many European countries (see European Commission 2013), teacher educators are rarely prepared for their role as a teacher educator. This means that becoming a teacher educator does not require a specific teaching certificate, any specific training, (formal) preparation course, qualification and/or teaching experience. Many Flemish teacher educators enter the teacher education profession with a background as former teachers, or as subject specialists mostly graduated from college-university (European Commission 2013; Vanassche et al. 2015). To put differently, the current practice suggests the work of teacher educators does not require specific expertise. As a consequence, systematic induction programmes and continuing professional development initiatives are not in place. Flemish teacher educators' professional development is not only influenced by their former careers, but also strongly influenced by their work contexts (European Commission 2013; Vanassche 2014; Vanassche et al. 2015). In this respect, Flanders has a dual system in teacher education, with universities offering a research-based 'academic'

Provider	Professional teacher training		Research based teacher training	
	Colleges of Higher Education		Centres for Adult Education	Universities
Type of program	Integrated program	Specific program	Specific program	Specific program
Course credits	180 ECTS	60 ECTS	60 ECTS	60 ECTS
Content	Extended practical training	Professional teacher training program after an initial subject-oriented study	Practical teacher training program for adults with relevant work experiences	Academic teacher training after a subject-oriented study

Figure 1. Teacher training programmes in Flanders.

teacher training programme, and colleges of higher education and centres for adult education providing ‘professional’ teacher training programmes (see Figure 1). Although colleges of higher education can now start up applied research projects, their core business remains the education of professional teachers, while fundamental and theory-oriented research remains the core business of universities. Teacher educators working in non-university settings (colleges of higher education and centres for adult education) are hardly engaged in applied research, while teacher educators working at universities mostly are.

Moreover, there is no governmental policy putting forward quality standards or academic/professional development benchmarks for Flemish teacher educators. This is similar to the situation in most European Member States. However, recently ‘The Flemish Teacher Educator Development Profile’ (VELOV 2012) was developed and updated (VELOV 2015) by a regional teacher education network and is now disseminated by the professional association of teacher educators. The lack of a regulatory framework explains why such initiatives – as yet – hardly impact teacher education reality.

4. Method

4.1. Research goal and questions

Given the lack of little systematic routes for teacher educators’ professional development, and the lack of any formal preparation or induction programme for Flemish teacher educators, the aim of this paper is to better understand how these teacher educators perceive their current professional development. This brings us to the following research question: ‘What characterises teacher educators’ current professional development in Flanders?’ To answer this question, the following sub-questions are formulated:

- (a) What professional development opportunities do Flemish teacher educators currently have? (RQ1a)
- (b) What professional development needs do Flemish teacher educators currently report? (RQ1b)

4.2. Research context

In 2006, a Decree was implemented involving actions to improve teacher education quality in Flanders. The aim of the decree was twofold: (1) tackling the theory-knowledge gap, and (2) supporting the (further) professional development of (beginning) teachers (Flemish

Parliament 2006, 3). Surprisingly, the Decree did not pay specific attention to the role and professional development of teacher educators. In 2012, a large-scale policy implementation evaluation study (EVALO 'When the chalk dust settles', 2012) was funded by the government to evaluate the implementation of the 2006 Decree. A quantitative survey study was set up, involving 6234 stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, mentors, students, head of departments and institution-based teacher educators). Moreover, 51 qualitative focus-group interviews were organised, comprising of on average eight participants. The EVALO-project was the first large-scale study in Flanders, which included a study of teacher educators and their professional development as a corner stone when evaluating teacher education quality. In this article, we exclusively focus on a secondary analysis of the data collected from institution-based teacher educators. This means that a sub-group of 611 institution-based teacher educators was involved in the study. Moreover, five focus-group interviews focussed on the theme 'Professional development of teacher educators'; 24 institution-based teacher educators participated in these discussions.

4.3. Research design

The present study applied a convergent parallel mixed methods design, comprising (1) a concurrent but separate quantitative and qualitative data collection, (2) a separate and independent quantitative and qualitative analysis, (3) the merging of the two data sets, and (4) an interpretation phase to develop a better understanding of responses to the study's overall purpose (Creswell 2003). The strategy of research used in the quantitative part of the study is a survey, whereas the strategy of research applied in the qualitative part is a focus group.

4.4. Participants

In total, 611 institution-based teacher educators in Flanders completed the teacher educator survey. All Flemish institutions – organising a teacher education programme, participated in the study. The survey was aligned with the type of teacher education programme, teacher education institution, and organisation size. Moreover, at least 10 teacher educators per teacher education programme were required to participate in the research. Table 1 provides information on demographics as age, gender, nationality and mother tongue. Most

Table 1. Gender, age, nationality and mother tongue from institution-based teacher educators ($n = 611$) in Flanders.

Institution-based teacher educators		
Gender	Male	192 (31.4%)
	Female	419 (68.6%)
	Total	611 (100%)
Age	26–35	139 (22.7%)
	36–45	144 (23.6%)
	46–55	207 (33.9%)
	56–66	121 (19.8%)
	Total	611 (100%)
Nationality	Belgian	586 (96.1%)
	Other	25 (3.9%)
	Total	611 (100%)
Mother tongue	Dutch	608 (99.5%)
	Other	3 (0.5%)
	Total	611 (100%)

participants are female, holding a Belgian nationality and (almost) all of them speak Dutch as their mother tongue. The mean age of a Flemish institution-based teacher educator is 47 years ($SD = 10.7$) Table 1.

Table 2 describes aspects of teacher educators' professional background and provides information on participants' highest degree, if they have a teaching qualification and if they have experience as a teacher.

Most institution-based teacher educators hold at least a Master's degree (87.6%); a minority possesses a Doctoral degree (8.9% of the institution-based teacher educators). Almost all respondents attained a teaching qualification. Only 44% of the participants have teaching experiences in kindergarten or compulsory education and these experiences are rather short (88% has less than 5 years' experience).

On average, they have eight years' experience as a teacher educator ($SD = 2.8$). Most teacher educators (59%) participating in the survey, contribute to an 'integrated programme' at a College of Higher Education; 21% is working in a 'specific programme' at a Centre for Adult Education, 12% is occupied in a 'specific programme' at a University and a minority (8%) is working at a 'specific programme' in a College of Higher Education. Only 51% of institution-based teacher educators have a fulltime occupation. Most teacher educators' main teaching subject is 'Educational Sciences' ($n = 249$; 40.8%), about one fifth is teaching 'Languages' ($n = 114$; 7.8%); others are teaching 'Sciences' ($n = 96$; 15.7%), 'Art Sciences' ($n = 71$; 11.6%), 'Health Sciences' ($n = 51$; 8.3%) and 'Cultural Sciences' ($n = 53$; 8.7%).

A total of 24 institution-based teacher educators from the survey took also part in five separate focus group discussions (varying from 3 to 9 teacher educators per focus group). Consent to participate was included, which allowed each participant to indicate their agreement as participants in the study.

Based on a contractual agreement with the educational authorities, researchers had to ensure that the institutional origin of the data could not be traced in both the survey and focus group data. This explains why e.g. no comparison between the focus groups is being carried out in the analysis and results section.

4.5. Procedure

In view of participation, the Head of Department or a person with a comparable role and responsibility was defined to function as a go-between between researchers and the teacher education institution. The first part of the teacher educator survey included 12 questions about teacher educators' demographics (e.g. sex, year of birth, nationality), and their

Table 2. Highest study degree, teaching qualification and teaching experience from institution-based teacher educators ($n = 611$) in Flanders.

Institution-based teacher educators		
Study degree	Secondary education	9 (1.3%)
	Bachelor	68 (11.1%)
	Master	479 (78.7%)
	Doctoral degree	55 (8.9%)
Teaching qualification	Yes	591 (96.7%)
	No	20 (3.3%)
Teaching experience	Yes	269 (44%)
	No	342 (56%)

professional background (e.g. teacher education institution, teacher education programme). The second part of the teacher educator survey included 12 items about teacher educators' current professional development opportunities and needs. The items were based on the 2006 Decree on teacher education stressing twelve challenging themes for teacher education in Flanders. These themes cover: (1) diversity in teacher education, (2) teaching in a metropolitan context, (3) diverse educational tracks in secondary education, (4) language education, (5) aspiration of learning goals and standards, (6) integrated ICT use, (7) assessment and evaluation, (8) collaborative learning, (9) project work, (10) developing entrepreneurship, (11) activating teaching methods, and (12) competence-based working. An example-item is: 'To what extent does your teacher education institution currently invest in professional development activities about classroom diversity?' Participants were asked to rate each item separately on a four-point continuum: 0 = (almost) no attention, 1 = a bit of attention, 2 = medium attention, 3 = a lot of attention. If teacher educators were unsure, they could select '9' = 'I have no idea'. After receiving an invitation by mail by their Head of Department, participants completed the survey online. Of course, the Head of Departments did not have access to the participants' answers to safeguard trustworthiness and anonymity.

The focus group discussions were set-up as small groups of institution-based teacher educators to develop a more detailed and in-depth understandings (Van Hove and Claes 2011). In total, fifteen focus groups were set up involving 105 teacher educators. Considering the fact the 2006 Decree covers 23 different topics, it was not feasible to present all topics to all focus groups. In only five focus groups, there was a focus on teacher educator development. Focus groups were organised in five different geographical locations to foster efficient access to the focus groups, but also to respect the agreement with the educational authorities that responses could not be traced back to specific institutions. The five related focus group discussions – which lasted about an hour – focussed on (1) teacher educators' background and expertise, and (2) teacher educators' current professional development opportunities and professional development needs. Stimulus material was used, but only intended to help participants developing a personal opinion about the topics. It did not direct their answers in any way; that is: no examples or suggestions were formulated. A team of three researchers conducted the focus groups. A structured interview protocol was developed to safeguard the somewhat standardised approach. Moreover, the researchers were trained together in view of conducting the focus group interviews. During the focus groups, consensus was often reached. This is, however, typical – and an objective – of focus groups organised to discuss policy related topics in education (Van Hove and Claes 2011).

Quality of the content and structure of the research instruments/approach were safeguarded by the following activities: (1) feedback on the content and structure of the survey and focus group by a team of experts, (2) piloting of the survey and focus group to test for language, and (3) technical advice and support; especially in view of the online survey.

4.6. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were applied to develop a first picture of the quantitative data. SPSS was used to further analyse the data. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. Different steps were used during the coding process of the focus groups. During the first step, distinct categories in the data were distinguished related to our research questions. For example, one of these main categories in

our data referred to ‘barriers that hinder teacher educators’ professional development’. Second, deductive coding was used to refine these broad categories, resulting in subcategories, as for instance ‘time’ and ‘lack of recognition’. Next, we focused on these categories while re-reading our transcripts. This process was necessary to confirm that our categories accurately represented focus group responses, and to explore how our categories were related to another. Finally, our categories were transferred into a coding scheme to organise our results. During this in-depth process, the coding schemes were reviewed and commented on their accuracy by all co-authors during multiple meetings to promote trustworthiness. In the process of generating codes, words or phrases that emerged directly from the transcripts were used in order to stay as close to the original transcripts as possible. Verbatim comments from the focus group discussions are used to illustrate the occurring themes. Comparing and discussing the researchers’ ideas throughout the analysis process employed a researcher triangulation strategy.

Side-by-side comparison for merged data analysis in mixed methods designs (Creswell 2003) was conducted after separate data analysis, presenting the quantitative results and the qualitative findings grouped for each research question in the ‘Findings’ section, in view of comparison.

5. Findings

5.1. What characterises teacher educators’ current professional development in Flanders?

5.1.1. What professional development opportunities do Flemish teacher educators currently have? (RQ1a)

To develop an understanding of teacher educators’ current professional development opportunities, all institution-based teacher educators ($n = 611$) are asked to evaluate how much attention is paid to specific professional development themes. Table 3 provides an overview of the results. Scores close to 0 refer to ‘(almost) no attention’, close to 1 to ‘a bit of attention’, close to 2 ‘medium attention’ and close to 3 ‘a lot of attention’.

In general, all professionalisation themes receive rather low attention, with scores varying between 1.15 (a bit of attention) to 1.98 (medium attention). Most attention is spent on topics as ‘integrated ICT use’ (2.09), ‘activating teaching methods’ (1.98), ‘language education’ (1.88), ‘competence-based working’ (1.85), and ‘diversity in teacher education’ (1.88). ‘Activating teaching methods’ (2.38) seems to receive more attention in the specific programmes of colleges of higher education, compared to the other programmes.

Least attention is spent on ‘teaching in a metropolitan context’ (1.33) and ‘developing entrepreneurship’ (1.15). The topic ‘developing entrepreneurship’ seems to receive especially low attention at universities (0.77) and centres for adult education (0.80).

These rather modest survey scores are mirrored in the specific responses of teacher educators ($n = 24$) in the focus groups. They seem largely individually responsible for their own professional development. One of the participants summarises:

There really isn’t much ... We are completely responsible for our own professional development. Teacher educators often have to rely on the goodwill of their colleagues.

Moreover, the fact their professional development remains rather unstructured and non-compulsory, implies there large differences between teacher educators' current engagement in professionalisation activities can be observed:

There is absolutely no follow-up. Within our team, there are several colleagues who do not take up any professional development activity.

Another teacher educator further argues:

Isn't it incredible? The fact that you can do absolutely nothing, that you are not participating in any in-service workshop, do not attend conferences, do not read research literature and still be paid? In my opinion, that is really a thing of the past?

Other teacher educators stress this lack of attention for professional development is not always problematic and should be considered from an institutional policy perspective. For example, a participant argues:

Within our team, each member's engagement in professional learning activities is very visible. In this respect, we have to submit and present an evaluation report each three years and share our experiences on an online learning platform with our colleagues.

Moreover, participants seem to agree the current approach to their professional development consists too often of general and one-off workshops with little-long term impact. A participant clearly states:

Our professional development possibilities are often delimited to attending too wide-ranging and general workshops that have a focus on the work field [teachers] or on higher education in general, instead of a focus on our development as teachers of teachers.

Another participant adds:

It's often a wasted afternoon, spent sitting on a chair, listening to something that is often too general to apply to your own practice.

Another aspect that re-occurs in every focus group discussion is the lack of attention on the development of teacher educators' role as a researcher. One of the participants argues:

What is even more problematic, is that the role of researcher is really lacking within our professional practices. How can we expect from our students to engage in research, if we don't succeed to conduct research ourselves?

Next to being an model for (future) teachers, a stronger focus on research is also needed to develop and share expertise and knowledge within and beyond the teacher education institution. As to the latter, participants argue the collaboration and networking between teacher educators could be further improved:

We know nothing about each other. There needs to be more collaboration, networking, sharing developed expertise and knowledge ... Instead, it just all vanishes and disappears ...

However, despite this general lack of attention for teacher educators' professional development, teacher educators themselves take the need for their personal professional development seriously:

What is essential, I think ... is to understand that we have to be the best; we are 'teachers of teachers'. That involves a large responsibility, which cannot be underestimated.

During the focus groups, teacher educators also discussed the need for teaching experience before entering the job. In this respect, teacher educators are often frustrated about their lack of teaching experiences. A teacher educator argues:

A lot of our colleagues have no teaching experiences [in compulsory education]. I think that is a very problematic situation. How can they teach future teachers if they have not been teaching themselves before? How do they get their credibility?

On the other hand, several participants question the argument that ‘a good teacher will surely be a good teacher educator’. One of the participants further explains:

Our students cannot simply reproduce our behaviour. We all strongly claim that a good teacher educator has tons of experience as a teacher ... But is teaching experience really what matters? To be honest, how much of our previous teaching experiences and knowledge can be used successfully into our own practice as teacher educators?

Flemish institution-based teacher educators’ professional development opportunities are currently limited and teacher educators’ mainly remains a personal responsibility. The current supply is characterised by too general on-off workshops with little long-term impact, and with a limited focus on developing the role of a researcher. Given the lack of a clear policy on teacher educators’ professional development, teacher educators’ engagement remains mostly ad hoc and depends on chance and goodwill (both from the individual teacher educator and the teacher education institute).

5.1.2. What professional development needs do Flemish teacher educators currently report? (RQ1b)

Related to Flemish teacher educators’ professional development needs, findings from the qualitative focus groups reveal teacher educators are willing to redirect current policy and professional development practices. Teacher educators want more visibility and recognition for their engagement in professional development activities and enumerate several alternatives to enhance participation: ‘a proportional relation between teacher educators’ commitment to further develop as a teacher educator and their salary’; ‘mandatory and visible registration of teacher educators’ professional development activities’; and ‘abolishing permanent appointments’. However, and different from these extrinsic motivators, most participants believe their engagement in professionalisation activities would be more powerful if time is secured to engage in professional development:

Time is currently lacking. Our further professional development should be a formal part of our job responsibility. I am very jealous when I hear international colleagues say, ‘for my research I am doing this/that ...’ Often they can spend one fifth of their appointment to studying teacher education. Do you know how enriching that would be?

Participants also stress their need to network, to exchange experiences, and to work together with colleagues, not only within the own teacher education institution, but also beyond. Moreover, several teacher educators stress the added value of –often-informal – learning from colleagues in other teacher education programmes and the relevance of international contacts and collaborations to learn about good practices abroad. In three focus groups, teacher educators discuss the possibility of developing a public forum to share expertise:

We need to share our expertise – and I strongly believe we have a lot of expertise – maybe in a national knowledge base for teacher educators? Or, an international one?

Instead of attending – as what they describe – too general workshops, most participants argue that it would be more fruitful to have time to engage in professional development activities that are closely linked to their own teacher educators’ practices. These activities are preferably organised as long-term professional development trajectories with a sustainable and contextualised integrated character:

If I can dream ... I would organise my own professional development as the participation in long-term trajectories with a close link to my own practice. Such initiatives would offer the opportunity to support the development of an inquiring stance, and allow me to grow into my own practice as teacher of teachers.

A last aspect receiving a lot of attention in the focus groups is a multi-dimensional focus on research. Next to modelling (future) teachers, a stronger focus on research is considered essential to ground the theoretical underpinning of teacher educators' behaviour and beliefs, to support the development of educators' inquiry as stance, and to share new expertise within and beyond the teacher education institute. A participant elaborates:

I believe that lifelong learning implies an active engagement in research as I am strongly convinced that what we do in education can always be improved. You could attend research conferences, read research journals, participate in research groups, ...

Finally – and also related to their role as a researcher – several teacher educators also express their need to (further) develop an 'inquiring stance':

Developing an inquiring stance and have opportunities to engage in research are very essential because we need to be able to conduct practitioner research ourselves ... Practitioner research ... because it has an immediate focus on improving our own practice and the wider field of education.

Concerning their professional development needs, teacher educators express a general need for specific time to engage in formally recognised long-term professional development activities that are closely linked to their own teacher education practices. Moreover, the participants' stress the need to develop a shared knowledge base about teacher education, the need for more opportunities to engage in informal learning and collaboration with (inter) national colleagues, and the need to engage in practitioner research and to develop an inquiring stance.

6. Conclusions and discussion

The results of the present study add to a growing body of literature by presenting the results of a large-scale mixed method study on teacher educators' professional development and giving voice to teacher educators themselves, a professional group often neglected in the research literature and policy documents.

The research question 'What characterises teacher educators' current professional development in Flanders?' explored institution-based teacher educators' professional development needs and opportunities. The findings reflect low overall attention paid to professional development and they stress the voluntary nature of engagement in professional development activities (European Commission 2013; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014; Smith 2003; Zeichner 2005). The qualitative findings further indicate that institution-based teacher educators currently experience a lack of structurally available time to engage in professional development. Moreover, the current supply is too often organised as general professional development activities, as one-off workshops with little long-term impact, without being compulsory, and without formal recognition or accreditation. Furthermore, an urgent need for a structural instalment of time frames to engage in professional development that is closely linked to their own practices as a 'teacher of teachers' is expressed. This is in line with the findings of Griffiths and colleagues (2014). These activities should be organised as long-term sustainable recognised formal professional development trajectories, in

collaboration with (international) colleagues. Finally, the findings also indicate that teacher educators want to further develop their role as a researcher, develop a shared knowledge base on teacher education, and develop an 'inquiring stance', currently lacking in most teacher educators' professional practices (see Loughran 2014).

More importantly, the findings of this study put forward evidence to direct related policies. As stated in the introduction of this article, empirical evidence in this domain is lacking to direct focused innovation and practices. The study adds to the broader discussion about quality in higher education by shifting the attention to the professional status of the higher education teaching staff. Empirical literature about professional development programmes in HE remains scarce (Stes, Coertjens, and Van Petegem 2010; Stewart 2014). The particular needs of the teacher educators add to the critical literature about the quality of current professional development and the lack of focus on the needs of the target group (Kennedy 2005; Sandholtz 2002). In addition, our results show that next to teacher educator characteristics and the design of a professional development initiative, also the work environment is critical (see De Rijdt et al. 2013). The related comments of the teacher educators stress the need for institutional support in terms of getting time, resources, alignment with overall professional development requirements, remuneration and certification (Brand 1998); the establishment of communities of learners (Putnam and Borko 2000); setting up local communities of practice, and to 'deconstruct managerialist thinking about continuing professional development'. The latter implies continuous development is needed (Knight 2002, 230).

The present study is not without limitations. Most are related to the larger setting of the evaluation study of teacher education in Flanders. This resulted in covering a large number of topics, while involving a large number and variety of subjects. This resulted in developing a rather general and not an in-depth picture of the current state-of-the-art. Given the focus on the evaluation of the 2006 Decree, the study only helped studying the situation at a given moment in time and does not respect changes over time. The 2006 Decree also defined to a large extent the content of the survey and focus group questions. This implies a validity study was not key in the present situation. Moreover, the study builds on self-reports. No checks were built-in to monitor related discrepancies between reports and the teacher education reality. Lastly, we only focus on institution-based teacher educators and not on school-based teacher education staff. The latter – though having a key responsibility in mediating the institution-practice transition could have added a particular focus on teacher educator professional development. Further research is needed to understand the identity and professional development of mentors (as recommended by Livingston 2014 and Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). The latter was somewhat out of the scope of the policy evaluation study from which we derived the data. Previous research has shown that especially mentors have difficulties in identifying themselves, or being accepted as teacher educators (Bullough 2005). If mentors are not formally recognised and supported as school-based teacher educators, they may struggle to have meaningful working relationships with other groups of teacher educators, such as institution-based teacher educators (European Commission 2013).

Future research should empirically advance insight into relations between promising activities aiming at teacher educators' professional development (for instance, conducting research into one's own practices during a professionalisation course) and resulting – long term -outcomes (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014).

Despite these limitations, these findings hold important implications and suggestions for future practices focussing on the support of teacher educators' professional development. A promising finding of the study is that teacher educators are willing and enthusiastic to learn from their colleagues and peers, and engage in tailor-made, contextualised professional development trajectories. Therefore, substantial attention needs to be given to the systematic nature of teacher educators' professional development (Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014). In particular, attention should be paid to professionalisation activities with a focus on the further development of teacher educators' inquiring stance and the support of teacher educators' role as a researcher (Livingston 2014; Loughran 2014; Tack and Vanderlinde 2014, 2016c). Thereafter, and throughout their careers, teacher educators should have access to high-quality opportunities for continuing professional development, conceived to meet their specific needs and taking into account teacher educators' individual sense of responsibility for their own professional learning. Currently, there is still too much dependency on small-scale, occasionally funded, 'ad hoc', and local initiatives to support teacher educators' professional development. Structural measures have to be taken, and we have to move towards more formally recognised and sustainable initiatives. Several good examples from other countries can be used as an inspiration to strengthen the situation in the Flemish context (also see 'State of the art'). Moreover, limited attention is paid to teacher educators' international mobility and partnerships. However, with the establishment of InFoTED, the MOFET institute and the NAFOL school, the possibilities for establishing such partnerships have never been so abundant. The potential to interconnect all these actions and establish an international network needs to be recognised. Finally, teacher educators' professional development should not remain a lonely enterprise (Berry 2016). In line with Berry (2016, 52), we agree that ideas of teacher educators' professional development need to shift from 'something you do only by yourself, to something that you do by yourself, with others'. Such a shift in thinking recognises teacher educators' professional development as a process undertaken by autonomous professionals in community with others.

Teacher educators' professional development is an unavoidable process, and an integral part of improving education in general. Therefore, it is essential that teacher educators become active agents into their own development by updating themselves with new information and continuously create and refine knowledge on teaching and teacher education, in order to improve their own practice. In this respect, this study has been a first important step in giving voice to a group that has too often been neglected in teacher education policy and research in Flanders and far beyond.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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