



*In His  
Sublime Name*

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**Faculty of Literature and Humanities  
Department of English language and Literature**

**M.A. Thesis**

**Formal and Informal leaning among English Language Teachers: A  
Community of Practice Perspective**

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**December 2011**



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## **Abstract**

Professional development of teachers has been the focus of many scholars mainly to address the problems and complexities they have been confronted with and to open new pathways for improving their professional knowledge and development. In response to the lack of such studies on issues that affect English teachers' professional development in Iran this study aims to take into account the situation of teachers who trained at Teacher Training Centers in this country from the beginning of their education to their current status at schools.

To this end, a text analysis on Educational program of Teacher Training Centers in Iran was done and a semi-structured interview was run with eight informants who were trained at different Centers and have variable differences in teaching. The theoretical lens that this study uses to provide a detail analysis of these teachers' learning and experiences is the theory of communities of practice by Wenger (1998). Their learning experiences are analyzed in terms of formal and informal learning which have been proposed by Hager and Halliday (2006). Generally, the aim of this study is to use centrality of practice in communities of practice theory to explain the learning experiences of English teachers in terms of formal and informal learning experiences.

It has been revealed that student teachers were only limited to the formal learning opportunities that were provided by Teacher Training Centers during their education. These opportunities were not influential on their professional development except a few ones and the inefficiency of Teacher Training Center in providing those students with more learning opportunities was that it was affected by the negative effects of institutionalization. Another reason is that its curriculum failed in integrating students in socialization process. Problems and complexities that student teachers confronted in the application of what they learned at TTC, particularly regarding the application of teaching approaches, were investigated to confirm this inefficiency. It is also revealed that although their learning opportunities were hindered at TTC, their learning process was not stopped and their involvement in teachers' community of practice after the ending of their education was the beginning of their learning process. Their learning experiences both came naturally from their involvement in that community and emerged as a response to their lack of meaningful experience at TTC. Besides, simultaneous formal and informal learning opportunities were appreciated by participants and it was confirmed that these two kinds of learning are complementary. Finally what makes this study different from other

ones is the experience of one of the participants who was a teacher before entering Teacher Training Center. His difference with other participants is that he pointed to the pedagogical inference as the result of anticipation of informal learning; that was the result of anticipatory access to the practice of teachers' community, to formal learning. Pedagogical implication and suggestion for further research are also provided.

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*To*

*My parents and my dear  
husband*

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## **Acronyms and abbreviations**

TTC: Teacher Training Center

COP: Community of Practice



# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

## **1.1. Introduction**

I remember when I was an undergraduate student, one of my professors majored in TEFL always reminded us that our learning of the necessary teaching skills would start when we begin our actual teaching process, and a noticeable percentage of what we learned in theory at university may not be practical and useful then. His intention was to draw our attention to this fact that our identity as teachers would be shaped mostly by the beginning and pursuing of our teaching process. This fact did not make sense to me until I began my job as an English teacher. I was not majored in TEFL during my B.A period of education, my major was English literature, but there were some courses in teaching methodology and testing in our instructional program to take. I thought that after taking these courses, I would be ready to function as a teacher without any problem. I had many teaching methods and learning theories in my mind and I thought that I knew how to design a valid test and how to evaluate learners.

After getting my B.A degree, I was accepted to start my job as a teacher in a private institute. First, I was asked to observe some of their classes and learn how to teach in that context. I was shocked by what I saw. It was totally contrary to what I planned to apply in my classes. According to what I experienced only 10 percent of what I had learned was applied in those classes. I just became a little disappointed. However, I thought it depends on me how to teach and what to choose. Nevertheless, when I started my teaching what I knew was the knowledge I had in my mind while much of it was forgotten. The problem with the remained percent was that I did not know when and how to apply it. There were many questions in my mind. I wondered why my expectation did not come true. After a while, I got my answer. The problem was my insufficient practice and experience. Actually, I did not experience any learning situation with real students until that time. During my teaching experience, I realized the fact that what determines whether a teacher can be labeled as a proficient teacher or not, are those things that a teacher may gather during teaching beyond what he/she has learned through formal training.

As I mentioned above my major was not TEFL but I had some friends and colleagues that were majored in TEFL and actually were trained for functioning as a teacher. They

took more courses than I did in teaching methodologies and other related issues and they went through some practical courses too. The thing that was interesting for me was that they also had such problems. This memory and experience aroused me to search the literature to see if this problem has been addressed or not and to find how distinction can be made between what I experienced in my formal courses and the real context of my workplace. In responding to my questions regarding teachers' learning process of teaching skills and knowledge, I have found that this issue was not just my concern. One of the issues that I confronted with and helped me to find the answer of my questions was addressing the problem emerging from formal training of teachers in pre-planned training programs.

Followings sections provide a brief overview of what I have found and read regarding this issue in the literature and what I am going to do in this thesis to draw my readers' attention to some problems and issues in teacher education in my country.

## **1.2. Significance of teachers' professional development**

Many scholars have addressed professional knowledge and professional development, regardless of a special kind of profession. For example, Michal Eraut (2004) pointed out that professional knowledge is dependent on its usage and the way by which it is learned. He declared that the nature of professional knowledge would be revealed by considering the context in which it is acquired and the one in which it is used. According to him, the development of professional knowledge is not just depended on understanding of codified knowledge in books but most of it is constructed by experience. He also emphasizes the function of context in developing professional knowledge. The context in which learning takes place is very important because it is not possible to transfer what was learned in one context to another.

All of what Eraut (2004) proposed about professional development is also true for teachers. Among many different professions, professional development of teachers has always been of significant for many years and from different perspectives. According to Avalos (2011) the core of the studies done on teachers' professional learning is learning how to learn and learning how to transfer them into practice. One of the reasons for this outstanding attention to teacher education is that students have become more mature and their needs are changing in line with the current advancement in the new world. In line with this shifting in students' needs and their status in ever-evolving world teachers should

also keep up with these changes. Because of this need, changes should be done in teachers' educational program in accordance with new pedagogies.

One of the main issues in teachers' education has always been the dissatisfaction of teachers from the inefficiency of what they learned during their education in their teaching process. The main concern of most of the studies done in this area was to recover the shortcomings of traditional training programs of teachers in order to preparing teachers for new changes in students needs. For example, Sandholtz (2002), in one of his studies addressed some problems mentioned by teacher that were engaged in formal in-service training. Teachers described this kind of traditional training as boring and contributing to forget 90% of what they learn. In other words, teachers complained that they were not active participants in their own professional development. Moreover, the focus was just on their technical competence not practical one. In order to recover these shortcomings, Sandholtz appraises the significance of providing teachers with opportunities for participation at school. In line with his study, Sutherland, Scanlon and Sperring (2005), reported that it is through the partnership in community of teachers that pre-service teachers can make a relation between the theoretical knowledge they learned at university and what is practical to do in classrooms and schools. This is how they can learn meaningfully the application of what they learned. In another study by Buitink (2008) the benefits of school-based education is investigated by engaging student teachers in an in-service program in which practice is at the center of their participation and they are involved in the regular work of teaching as real teachers.

In addition to engagement in simultaneous theory learning and practice, teacher professional development is also explored from another perspective, that is; collaboration. Findings of a study by Beckingham, Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger (2004) show that as the result of engaging in a collaborative model in both two years of their project teachers were actively engaged in learning and their view of learning and teaching was changed. This potential of collaboration is in contrast with traditional teacher education. Findings of Levine and Marcus' (2009) study on the effect of different kinds of collaborative activities on teachers' learning by conceptualizing teachers as a community of practice show that it is teachers' frequent access to their colleagues' "practice" that helps them to enhance their learning and their practice in class. Findings of a study by Erickson, Brandes, Mitchell and Mitchell (2005) also show the positive effects of collaboration on teachers' learning. The