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Research Paper

Iranian TEFL Ph.D. Candidates' Conception of Professional Identity Development in Doctoral Education

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Abstract

The present study investigated the TEFL Ph.D. candidates' conception (TPCs) of professional identity development (PID) during doctoral program. To this end, under a mixed-method design, two instruments were used to collect data: a four-point Likert-scale researcher-made questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. First, the questionnaire was mailed to 80 Iranian Ph.D. students selected through simple random sampling. Then, to yield an in-depth understanding of how they develop their professional identity, 10 participants with more than 10 years of teaching experience were asked to take part in the interview. The results obtained from the analysis of the elicited data indicated that majority of the participants believed that lack of practical professional development courses, lack of scholarship, lack of employer support, the high cost of Ph.D. opportunities, and trivial increase in job satisfaction and security were among the hurdles of to their professional identity development. Regarding the factors influencing some participants' withdrawal from Ph.D. studies, the results revealed that feeling of isolation and lack of dissertation writing groups were the most significant reasons. The findings of the study can have some pedagogical implications for teacher education programs in that they can be used to emphasize their strengths, eliminate their weaknesses, and to provide stakeholders with ample opportunities to improve the quality of doctoral education.

Keywords: *TEFL Ph.D. candidates, professional identity development, doctoral education*



Introduction

According to Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, and Lo (2012), preparation for a Ph.D. life appears to be a vital transition stage in Ph.D. candidates' academic lives. Previous studies on the doctoral experience, they add, suggest that Ph.D. candidates confront a variety of challenges during this developmental change. A bulk of studies, therefore, emphasize the importance of settling these challenges and making improvements in post-graduate education programs (Son and Park, 2014).

It is widely acknowledged that satisfying reforms within post-graduate education programs, which, in turn, result in productive academic outcomes, can be achieved by the investigation into Ph.D. candidates' experiences and the incorporation of those experiences (Gholami, Alinasab, Ayiewbey, and Nasimfar, 2019), into a new professional identity.

The past decade has witnessed a rise in studies on TEFL students' identity development, which shed a positive light on the complex experiences of these teacher candidates in their situated sociocultural and institutional contexts. In the last decade, teacher identity emerged as a separate research area (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop, 2004). However, the limited investigation into the TPCs' conceptions towards identity construction during TPEP implies that there is a need for the postgraduate stakeholders to consider the challenges of TPCs and to make compensating improvements accordingly.

The present study aims to provide insights about the ways in which teacher education programs, by considering the process of TPCs' PID, can facilitate TPCs' growth as TEFL professionals. It draws on Wenger's (1999) social theory of communities of practice, which emphasizes individuals' self-identification and negotiation as they search for access and membership to professional communities and participate in their activities. Using this theoretical framework, TEFL Ph.D. candidates' conceptions regarding their professional identity changes and important factors in this respect are explored in terms of learning, participation in practices, and identity. Identity formation resulting from participating in and learning from the practices of a community is a topic that was initially investigated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and further clarified in Wenger's (1998) later work. Wenger stated that as people participate in a community of practice, they acquire new knowledge, and simultaneously their identities or their sense of who they are, change. As Wenger (1999) indicated, the recognition of one's capability as valued by the community is an important source of professional identity development (Smith, Hayes, and Shea, 2017).

Literature Review

As indicated by Wenger (1999), the recognition of one's capability as valued by the community is an important source of PID. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that identity formation results from participating in and learning from the practices of a community. Wenger's (1999) social theory of identity formation, which represents a sociocultural perspective, has been quite influential in understanding how language teachers shape their professional identities.

The contribution of Contextual Factors to professional identity

In a study, Teng (2017) explored the role of emotions in six pre-service teachers' PIDs during their practicum utilizing a qualitative case study design. The data analysis indicated that hidden emotional rules in the practicum have a significant negative impact on teachers' emotional experiences and identity construction. In particular, the pre-service teachers' negative emotions gradually increased due to hierarchical structures, contextual constraints, and lack of support from their mentors. This increase reduced the development of their teacher identity. In addition,

unequal power relationships between mentors and pre-service teachers left learners susceptible to a wide spectrum of negative emotions and caused them to reconstruct their identities as obedient assistants instead of autonomous teachers. However, increasing acceptance and progress on the part of their students can stimulate pre-service teachers to perceive their assumed roles and reconstruct their professional identity in a positive way. Teng contended that schools must learn to cherish pre-service teachers as autonomous agents. This will improve pre-service teachers' professional satisfaction, decrease burnout rates, enhance their perceived competence in understanding appropriate methods that must be undertaken to manage emotional instability, and equip them to help students perform better.

TEFL Ph.D. Education Program as Communities of Practice

Gholami et al. (2019), considering TPEP as a community of practice and utilizing an ecological model framework, conducted a cross-sectional study to investigate how TPCs' and Ph.D. graduates' lives were affected in different stages of the TPEP. To achieve this, ten TPCs or graduates representing the early, mid, and completion phases of the program, were interviewed to qualitatively gain their views regarding the program. It should be stated that the recognition of a variety of identities adopted by group members, which is a significant aspect in the community of practice framework, was the focus of their study. The results indicated that multiple interrelated and simultaneous factors shaped TPCs' identities. The most noteworthy elicited themes included satisfaction with teacher educators, dissatisfaction with academic procedures, and challenges related to the TPCs' private lives.

It should be mentioned that investigating the contextual aspects of learning facilitates the understanding of this complex process. Moreover, understanding teachers and trying to obtain a clear sense of their professional identity development is the key to understanding the process of learning and teaching (Varghese et al., 2005). The complicated nature of TPCs' professional identity development is tied to a wide range of social and contextual factors such as studying and working environment; therefore, it seems necessary to investigate how TPCs develop their professional identity in different contexts.

Although there exists reasonable literature on professional identity, there is a rather small body of literature concerning the notion of professional identity among TPCs in the context of Iran. Furthermore, in the literature, there are several modes of participation and interaction in the community of practice, while in the current study, it is argued that TPCs shape their professional identities by participating in and access to the general community of practice, gaining public recognition (social legitimation). Specifically, in the present study, one part of the community of practice participation is implemented through a social media platform such as Telegram.

A final word is that most previous studies explored TEFL Ph.D. candidates and teachers' professional identity either totally qualitatively (Abednia, 2012; Izadnia, 2016) or totally quantitatively, without considering teachers' voices (Khany and Malekzadeh, 2015; Mofrad, 2016).

Research Questions

Based on the aims of the study, the following two research questions were addressed:

RQ 1. What are the TEFL Ph.D. candidates' conception of important factors which hinder changes in their professional identity?

RQ 2. What are the TEFL Ph.D. candidates' conception of important factors which make them withdraw Ph.D. studies?

Method

Participants

The participants of the study included 80 Iranian TEFL Ph.D. candidates (40 females and 40 males within the age range of 35 to 44), with 3 to 15 years of teaching experience in universities, selected through simple random sampling. From among them, 11 participants refused to answer the questions fully, and 9 refused to do so partially.

Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. In the quantitative phase, the needed data were collected via a self-developed and piloted questionnaire, which was conducted online. Then, in the qualitative phase, to elicit a bulk of in-depth information, a semi-structured interview was used with 10 of the participants, both male and female. More specifically, triangulation of data was applied to reach more profound insights about the participants' conceptions of the changes in their professional identity during their education.

Instruments

To achieve the purposes of the study, the following instruments were exploited.

Researcher-made Questionnaire

To collect quantitative data, a self-developed and piloted questionnaire was administrated online. It was a four-point, Likert-scale questionnaire on professional identity. The first part of the questionnaire was on demographic information, and other parts dealt with perceived impacts of professional development activities and job satisfaction. It sought to represent the important characteristics of TPCs' professional development and to provide a nuanced understanding of their professional identity development, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices. To determine the content and face validity of the questionnaire, a panel of 3 experts who were familiar with the construct that the questionnaire was designed to measure were consulted and their comments led to the modification of a few items. The questionnaire and interview questions were therefore revised and developed considering their beneficial feedbacks. The questionnaire had 19 categories, including 57 sub-items, with the four starting items related to demographic information.

In order to increase the reliability and validity of the study, the questionnaire (as well as the interviews) was piloted using a sample of 30 people similar to the target sample of the study to confirm its potential to collect the required data (Dornyei, 2007). Furthermore, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to determine the internal reliability and to measure the degree to which the items of the questionnaire were related. Table 1 below shows the reliability statistics of Cronbach's Alpha (.82), indicating a high reliability.

Table 1

Reliability Statistics for questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Standardized Items	Based on N of Items
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.825

.823

53

Semi-structured Interviews

As required by explanatory sequential designs, a series of semi-structured individual interviews were also conducted with ten randomly-selected participants. The interviews were face to face and included a series of questions related to participation in professional development activities.

Procedure

The following steps were taken in conducting the current study. First, a professional development questionnaire in a google form was made available to TPCs, the obtained data were statistically analyzed and descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages of categorical variables, the means, and the standard deviations of numeric variables were calculated. Then, semi-structured interviews were arranged to learn more about how teachers were experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. The unit of analysis for coding purposes was all the responses to each of the ten questions. The transcripts were read many times by the researcher and were coded. Then, member checking was done to prove the trustworthiness of the data. Finally, the sub-categories and the main themes from the coded transcripts were extracted

Results

The analysis of the obtained data provided the following results in both quantitative and qualitative phases of the study.

Quantitative Phase

Exploring the First Research Question

Table 2 below displays the frequencies, percentages, and Std. Residuals for the participants' answers to the four items of the fifth section of the questionnaire targeting "participation in professional development activities." The results indicated that the majority of the participants claimed that they did not "attend workshops" (51.7 %), "observation visits to other academic contexts" (76.7 %), "in a network of teachers formed especially for PD" (63.3 %) and "mentoring and/or peer observation" (68.3 %). None of the Std. Residuals were beyond +/- 1.96. Therefore, they did not attend all the mentioned PD activities. These findings are represented schematically in figure 1 below, which displays the changes in TPC's participation in PD activities.

Table 2

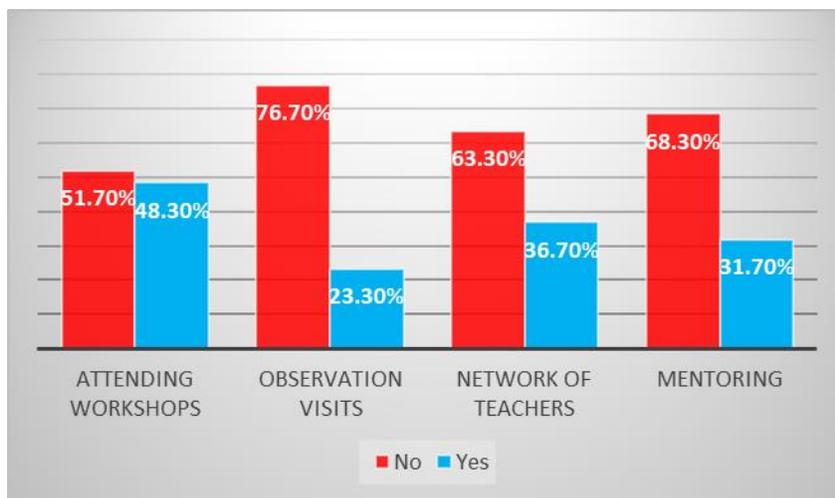
Frequencies, Percentages, and Std. Residual: Participation in Professional Development Activities

		Choices		Total
		No	Yes	
Workshops	Count	31	29	60
	%	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-1.3	1.7	
Observation visits	Count	46	14	60
	%	76.7%	23.3%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	1.1	-1.5	

Network of teachers	Count	38	22	60
	%	63.3%	36.7%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-.2	.2	
Mentoring	Count	41	19	60
	%	68.3%	31.7%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	.3	-.4	
Total	Count	156	84	240
	%	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%

Figure 1

Participation in Professional Development Activities

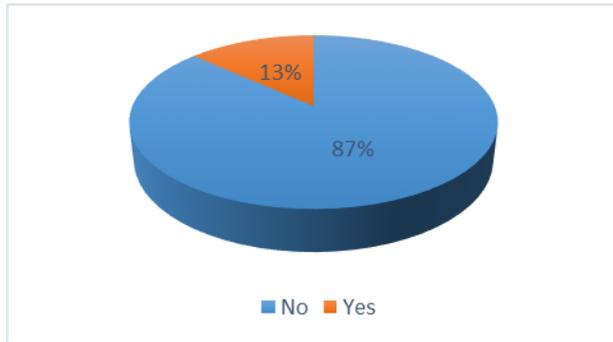


The eighth section of the questionnaire included a single question which targeted the amount of scholarship received during TPEP. The majority of the participants, i.e. 86.7 %, claimed that they did not receive any scholarship. Another 13.3 % stated that they received scholarship during TPEP. Table 3 and figure 2 below represent the percentage of the TPCs who held scholarship.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of TPCs who held Scholarship

	Choices		Total
	No	Yes	
Count	52	8	60
%	86.7%	13.3%	100.0%

Figure 2*Scholarship Received during TPEP*

The twelfth section of the questionnaire included a single question which asked the respondents if they wanted to participate in more PD activities during TPEP than that they had already done. The majority of the participants, i.e. 95 %, claimed that they wanted to participate in more PD activities than those they did during TPEP. Table 4 and figure 3 below represent the percentage of the TPCs who were willing to participate in more PD activities.

Table 4*Frequencies and Percentages of the TPCs who seek to Participate in more PD Activities*

	Choices		Total
	No	Yes	
Count	3	57	60
%	5%	95%	100.0%

Figure 3*Participating in more PD Activities*

Section thirteen of the questionnaire asked for any of the five reasons which prevented the participants to continue their Post-doctoral (PD) studies. Based on the results shown in Table 5 and figure 4 below, it can be claimed that “having access to no suitable PD” was the main obstacle hindering EFL teachers from participating in more PD. This was followed by “lack of employer staff” (n = 35, 61.4 %), and “being too expensive” (n = 34, 59.6%). The least restrictive factors were “conflict with work schedule” (n = 15, 26.3%) and “family responsibilities” (n = 12, 21.1 %). The results of the Std. Residuals indicated that a positive answer to “no suitable PD was

offered" (Std. Residual = 2 > 1.96) was significantly beyond what was expected, while the Std. Residuals for "conflict with work schedule" (Std. Residual = -2.2 > - 1.96) and "family responsibilities" (Std. Residual = -2.8 > -1.96) were significantly below expectation. Therefore, among them, lack of suitable PD offered, lack of employer support, and the high cost of PD opportunities were the most cited reasons, respectively.

Table 5

Factors which Prevented Participation in more Professional Development

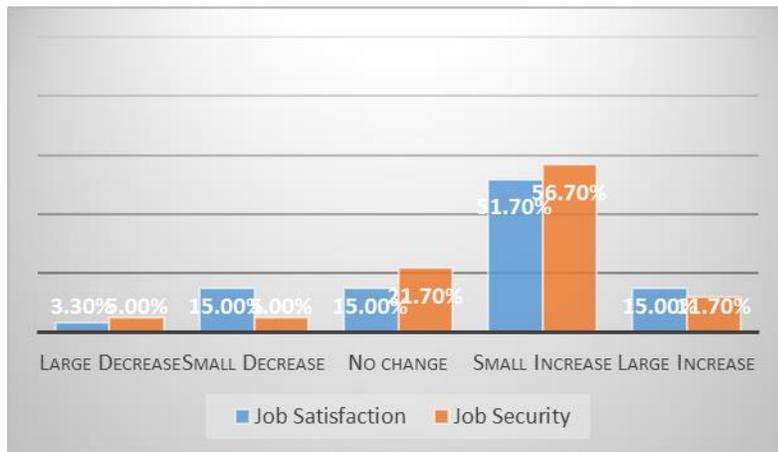
		Choices		Total
		Yes	No	
PD was too Expensive	Count	34	23	57
	%	59.6%	40.4%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	1.4	-1.3	
Lack of employer support	Count	35	22	57
	%	61.4%	38.6%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	1.6	-1.5	
PD conflicted with My work schedule	Count	15	42	57
	%	26.3%	73.7%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-2.2	2.1	
No time because of family responsibilities	Count	12	45	57
	%	21.1%	78.9%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-2.8	2.6	
No suitable PD was offered	Count	37	20	57
	%	64.9%	35.1%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	2.0	-1.9	
Total	Count	133	152	285
	%	46.7%	53.3%	100.0%

Figure 4*Factors Preventing Respondents from Participating in more PD*

As for the participants' answers to the two items of the fifteenth section of the questionnaire, which targeted the effect of TPEP on their job satisfaction and security, the results indicated that the majority of the respondents, i.e., 51.7%, believed that their job satisfaction had a small increase, 56.7% realized a small increase in their job security, 15% believed that their job satisfaction did not change, 11.7% estimated the increase in their job security as large, 10% believed that their job security had a small or very small decrease, and 21.7% believed that their job security did not change. These results are shown in Table 6 and Figure 5 below.

Table 6*Frequencies, Percentages, and Std. Residual: Impact of TPEP on Job Satisfaction and Security*

		Amount of Change					Total
		Large Decrease	Small Decrease	No change	Small Increase	Large Increase	
Job Satisfaction	Count	2	9	9	31	9	60
	%	3.3%	15.0%	15.0%	51.7%	15.0%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-.3	1.2	-.6	-.3	.4	
Job Security	Count	3	3	13	34	7	60
	%	5.0%	5.0%	21.7%	56.7%	11.7%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	.3	-1.2	.6	.3	-.4	
Total	Count	5	12	22	65	16	120
	%	4.2%	10.0%	18.3%	54.2%	13.3%	100.0%

Figure 5*Number of Changes in job Satisfaction and Security***Exploring the Second Research Question**

In the same vein as above, discouraging prospects of job security and satisfaction were among the factors considered by the participants as influential in their withdrawal from Ph.D.

Qualitative Phase

In this phase too, the major themes were reviewed and coded according to qualitative content analysis techniques (Creswell, 2012). The categories, subcategories, and main themes are represented in Table 7 below.

Results for the First Research Question**Table 7***The conceptions of the TPCs Towards Important Factors Hindering Changes in their PID*

Categories	Sub-categories	Main themes
Internal factors	Demotivating factors	Job dissatisfaction Job Insecurity The probable low morale in the future The probable self-inefficacy in the future Ph.D. Motivation decrease
External factors	1. The high cost of doctoral education 2. The demanding courses 3. Work-life imbalance 4. Time-wasting redundant theoretical courses 5. Time-wasting bureaucratic affairs 6. Lack of Support on	Less participation in practical PD activities Experiencing negative emotions and distress

the part of administrators and colleagues

7. Lack of community support for gathering data

8. Not providing an appropriate place for studying.

Internal Factors

Demotivating Factors

The participants mentioned that they had no job security. One of them noted, “They don't support us. After the Ph.D. program, we are on our own to find a job to have a better position in society.” Another remarked, “I do not have job security, stability, satisfaction, and comfortable work-life balance and style.”

Moreover, when they were asked about their self-efficacy and morale, or their general feeling of satisfaction which affects their willingness and enthusiasm to work, they said that they were not satisfied monetarily or non-monetarily, but they were self-confident and had self-efficacy, and this dissatisfaction did not affect their moral because they had received the positive feedback of their students. However, they believed that if the dissatisfaction with the monetary rewards would continue, it could decrease their teaching self-efficacy and morale in the future.

Furthermore, most of the participants realized that because of a stressful life, depression, the feeling of isolation, and many other peripheral factors, their Ph.D. motivation decreased after they started doctoral education.

External Factors

Seven out of 10 participants believed that meaningful professional development is not an easy, centralized, limited, and expensive job, and that they were willing to participate in in-service PD workshops and courses which would offer international certificates, but not available. One of them said, “You know because of the lack of existence of international courses for professional development like IELTS workshops or DELTA; there are few opportunities for more professional development.”

They also complained about the high cost of TPEP demanding courses, lack of practicum, lack of an appropriate place for studying, wasting a lot of time on bureaucratic affairs, work/life imbalance, and useless materials and theories, which have been imposed on them in their previous studies.

Lack of Support

The qualitative data illustrated that another hurdle to the PCs' PID was lack of administrators' and professional community's support. The participants asserted that only faculty members received financial support from the university.

Results for the Second Research Question

The major themes related to the second research question are summarized in the following table.

Table 8*The Conceptions of the TPCs Regarding Important Factors Causing Withdrawal from Ph.D.*

Categories	Sub-categories	Main themes
External and Internal factors	The absence of dissertation writing groups	Anxiety and depression Feeling of isolation
	The discouraging prospects of employment	limited opportunity of communication with supervisors
	Difficult bureaucratic affairs	
	The heavy workload of supervisors and advisors	

One of the participants who had decided to withdraw from TPEP, explained that she did not want to experience the same difficulties her previous professors experienced because many of them were dismissed after having passed years of work in the university. Then, she elaborated that lack of job security is the most important reason for her withdrawal, and another reason was the great anxiety and depression she experienced during her Ph.D. education. She added that the difficult process of bureaucratic affairs in the university prevented her from continuing his studies. She noted:

I have decided to study abroad because it can help me receive better education. A Ph.D. program is expected to provide a new and significant contribution to develop a field of study, but because of the heavy workload of supervisors and the limited opportunity of communication with them, we are not sure about what we want to do. Also, I know I won't have job security in Iran as I see my professors are being dismissed by the university because the number of students is dropping in Iran. In addition, I know I will confront various challenges and problems such as stress and unemployment problems.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated that the absence of practical identity development courses and overemphasis on theoretical courses were among the hurdles to professional identity development (PID). The results also showed that lack of suitable PD courses, lack of monetary or non-monetary support on the part of administrators, absence of appropriate place for studying, lack of community support for gathering data, work-life imbalance, high cost of PD opportunities, small increase in job security and satisfaction, wasting a lot of time on bureaucratic affairs, and financial problems are all among the hurdles to PID. Regarding the necessity for practical courses and activities, Richards and Lockhart (1991) and Gray's (2012) have stated that observing classes can help with professional identity development. Furthermore, several studies have shown the necessity of administrative support for teacher development (Crosby, 2015; Knobloch and Whittington, 2002), teaching self-efficacy increase, and retention in the job (Inman and Marlow, 2004), and many other studies (e.g. Ali, Kohun, and Levy, 2007; De Valero, 2001; Gururaj, Heilig, and Somers, 2010; Leijen, Lepp, and Remmik, 2016) have indicated that holding a scholarship may correlate with higher levels of students' satisfaction with their doctoral experience and lower attrition.

In line with the findings of the current study, several studies (Ali et al., 2007; Brown and Watson, 2010; Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, and Gisle, 2017; Longfield, Romas, and Irwin, 2006; Pocock, Elton, Green, McMahon, and Pritchard, 2011; Wellington and

Sikes, 2006) have revealed that social isolation often results from lack of support from the related departments, lack of time and/or money, inability to discuss academic matters with their scholarly community and classmates, and feeling guilty for spending time away from academic work. In the same vein, Cardona's (2013) revealed that inadequate training for research, lengthy-time of degree completion rates, funding challenges, limited academic job market, and high rates of candidates' attrition have continued to hinder Ph.D. education, thus leading post-graduate researchers to focus on the issue of motivation. He further showed that academic and social integration into Ph.D. community, socialization, financial factors, ability to cope with stress, and goal orientation are among the factors that affect the motivation to complete the degree. Muszynski's (1990) too proved that depression and feelings of isolation hindered motivation to complete the dissertation in a qualitative study of 120 doctoral students. He stated that doctoral students often do not seek appropriate support for such difficulties. As a result of these difficulties, student motivation to complete the Ph.D. degree decrease over time. As a solution, Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, and Hubbard (2018) claimed that although such factors as financial security and supervisors' support do contribute to TPCs' success in Ph.D. completion, TPCs' motivation, expectations, and self-regulation are most influential in in this respect.

Conclusion

The major goal of this study was to further our understanding of TEFL Ph.D. candidates' conception of some of the important factors affecting their professional identity development in doctoral programs, and to demonstrate what the knowledge of such factors could provide in supporting them to complete their Ph.D. studies. The findings revealed that the most notable external factors influencing TPCs' professional identity development are the demanding courses, lack of practical PD courses, lack of departmental support, lack of appropriate places to study, lack of community support for gathering data, work-life imbalance, not holding a scholarship, the high cost of PD opportunities, inappropriate socialization, inadequate supervision, financial problems, and time-consuming bureaucracy. Also, the findings showed that the most significant internal factors are motivational variables such as Ph.D. motivation decrease as well as a small increase in job security and satisfaction, depression, anxiety, and the feeling of loneliness. These findings have some practical implications for policy-makers, post-graduate administrators, faculty members, and the TPCs who are currently pursuing their Ph.D. education or planning to do so. In fact, identifying the impact of potential internal and external factors on TPCs' professional identity development may assist Ph.D. programs in establishing strategies to enhance Ph.D. education towards degree completion. As for removing the feeling of isolation, policy-makers can help TPCs to socialize with other TPCs through arranging dissertation writing groups (Cardona, 2013) and establishing networking and journal clubs which enable them to enter in a productive exchange with a group of their peers and colleagues and to be considered as surviving performers. Additionally, if TPCs who might have delay in their activities are recognized early in the Ph.D. program, they can be introduced to a pre-dissertation support group at the outset of their education, or can at least be informed of the potential obstacle ahead and advised on how to avoid procrastination.

Finally, the solution to TPCs' emerging emotional distress does not lie solely in universities doing more to balance the heavy workload of supervisors and their time constraints and to offer on-campus mental-health support, vital though such actions are. It also lies, in Nature's (2019) words, in acknowledging that depression and stress are at least partly a consequence of an excessive focus on measuring performance, something that academic institutions, journals, publishers, and funders, must all take responsibility for.

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