

# Teacher Education as a Profession with Standards in a System that Lacks Obligatory Standards

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## Preface

In recent years, the trend of examining how achievements in learning can be upheld has strengthened, as has the demand to incorporate standards into the entire education system. Some people demand that work be carried out according to standards, since they consider these standards to be milestones for the correct and appropriate way of operating, as well as definitions of educational objectives. In their view, the standard is a tool that assists in achieving goals. Other people demand that work be carried out according to standards, since they consider these standards to be a minimal requirement: a list of study contents, products, abilities and skills that every learner should aspire to achieve. Other views exist with regard to the role of standards in meeting the needs of various groups such as teachers, policy-makers, parents, the private market, and so on.

In order to understand the research that is being presented in this lecture, we will first clarify how we perceive the role of standards. We have here the findings of research conducted over several years, which examined the professional activity of a community of learners. The members of the community comprise teacher educators from all the colleges of education, as well as all the position-holders. Participation in the community is voluntary, based on interest and funded by the Ministry of Education. The idea that studying the practice of teaching teachers requires the creation of a community of learners was developed by Wenger (1998).

The examination that was performed yielded data that revealed that throughout the educational activity of the teacher educators, professional standards are meticulously observed, even though no obligatory standards exist at all. In the entire range of fields in which they work, unwritten but agreed standards are observed. These were constructed as a direct result of the teacher educators' work over the years. Work habits aim to achieve quality, professional development, and a basis for maintaining a high level and professional

discourse. Working according to standards as milestones enables professionals in the field of teacher education to hold a dialogue with the entire higher education system – colleagues in other institutions in particular and society in general.

## The study

Our study examines the work characteristics by analyzing the findings according to various dimensions.

Weiss (1998) mentions that programs or projects can be evaluated by means of a methodical examination of operational methods and the performance or the results of the activity, by comparing them to overt or hidden standards. In her opinion, evaluating programs by comparing them to standards would constitute a means of improving the program or project, or would serve as a component in decision-making processes regarding them. This is exactly what we did.

The Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) has formulated seven standards for teacher educators. Each standard contains indicators, evidence supporting proficiency, and evaluation modes. The study utilizes the ATE standards and draws a comparison, based on characteristic criteria, between the requirements of each standard on the one hand and the creativity and resultant products of the teacher educators on the other. The ATE standards constitute the research framework which aims to answer the follow research question: *How do teacher educators operate as a professional community that maintains high standards even though no obligatory national standards exist?* Practically speaking, a meticulous comparison was drawn between the work methods and results of the community of learners we investigated and the declared standards determined by the ATE.

The research is based on several hypotheses, which were propounded with regard to the ATE standards:

1. The assumption states that the standards were meant to serve as milestones for constant improvement, as indicators and not as dictates.
2. The assumption states that the standards are applicable to the entire teacher education system, and are not specific, local or institutional.
3. The assumption states that the standards are meant to provide opportunities for implementation.
4. The assumption states that the standards are not fixed and unequivocal, and can be altered over time.
5. The assumption states that the standards support activity and research and are not judgmental.
6. The assumption states that the standards, which are broadly written and formulated, permit a local interpretation.

The ATE declares that the standards it has devised are standards of practice in teacher education: "Standards of practice for teacher educators should represent agreements about what teacher educators should think about, know, and be able to do." The hypotheses and the agreements that we have presented with regard to the work of the teacher educator and to the standards afford us an opportunity to examine and survey our knowledge base. Cochran-Smith (2003) argues that one needs to conceptualize the education of teacher educators as a process of continual and systematic inquiry. The knowledge teacher educators need to teach well (i.e., the subject matter of teacher education) is generated when they treat their work as a site for intentional investigation at the same time they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation.

The teacher educators who are presented in the study are active in various frameworks of The MOFET Institute in addition to their work in teacher education institutions. The function of the Institute is to provide in-service professional development for the teacher educators, and to this end it operates and directs a broad range of formats. The research population consists of teacher educators from institutions of diverse orientations in different parts of the country. The participants include people of different religions, ages and outlooks, all of whom are engaged in professional development by means of building a professional community of experts.

## Research results

Maintaining standards is reflected in the work of the teacher educators as a community of colleagues. Their commitment to a high level of work is ingrained, despite the fact that the agencies responsible for the teacher education system do not require this on an obligatory official basis. It was found that over the years, work norms and habits were formed, and these allowed standards to be maintained by responding to the needs of the system, by upholding conceptual and up-to-date coherence, and by a desire to maintain quality and academic level. Our study relies on the collection of documentary data, responses to evaluative Likert-style questionnaires, individual and group interviews, and the analysis of curricula. The data has been collected over a period of six years from organizers, instructors and participants. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics as well as qualitative analysis of interviews and content documents.

In the comparison that will be presented, we will provide a few examples for each and every standard:

### The first standard

*Model professional teaching practices that demonstrate knowledge, skills and attitudes reflecting the best available practices in teacher education.*

This standard is expressed by activating a model of peer teaching in a specialization program for teacher educators. Peer teaching provides expert teacher educators with an opportunity to impart some of their work experience to others, and to deepen and improve their expertise. Teacher educators serve as lecturers and as expert tutors who accompany and direct their colleagues who are interested in specializing in their profession. The participants of the program consisted of teacher educators with a previous career in teaching and between two and ten years of seniority as teacher educators. The number of participants in each year of the course was approximately 50. The participants came from about 12 different academic colleges of education, from different sectors and from different national groups. A specialization course for teacher educators is two years long and includes three tracks, according to the position held in the college. The course operates on the basis of central lectures and tutorial work, short- and long-term workshops, brief sessions and study days.

How quality is maintained in the specialization studies?

- Most of the lecturers and tutors are teacher educators who are colleagues of the participants.
- In the tutorials, participants present case studies from their work in the field for discussion.
- Every activity is accompanied by an examination in which the needs are matched to the learners, and at its conclusion, the participants give feedback regarding their satisfaction.
- Every long-term activity is accompanied by action research conducted by colleagues who are expert researchers and are not involved in the specialization program.
- Evaluation research examines the place and extent of the topics, professional satisfaction with the lecturers, the structure and quality of the program, and so on.

### The second standard

*Inquire into and contribute to one or more areas of scholarly activity that are related to teaching, learning, and/or teacher education.*

In the framework of the community of colleagues, an Intercollegiate Research Authority operates, providing teacher educators with research services above and beyond the services that are offered in the research units that operate within each and every institution. The Intercollegiate Research Authority promotes research activity and contributes to the study of teaching and teacher education as well as to the specific disciplines taught in the colleges. The Authority sponsors pedagogical and disciplinary research conducted by teams and by individuals in the colleges. It initiates and encourages projects by providing funding, locating external sources of support, and linking up researchers involved in similar projects. It offers methodological instruction by assisting with data analysis and with the publication of findings.

As an example, we present data about studies that received support in the 2003-2004 academic year. During this year, teacher educators from 22 institutions of teacher education submitted 66 research proposals (some of which were intercollegiate proposals). In our study, we examined several basic characteristics of the proposals that were submitted:

With regard to the proposed research topics, it was found that eighteen proposals dealing with teacher education were submitted. In addition, eighteen proposals dealing with education were submitted. Together, these two fields constitute over fifty percent of the proposals. All the other proposals were linked to the disciplines and to fields that are studied in teacher education.

With regard to the gender of the submitting researchers, it was found that forty research proposals were submitted by female researchers, nineteen by male researchers, and seven by males and females together. 57.7% of the research proposals submitted by women were accepted, 58% of the proposals submitted by men were accepted, and 57% of the proposals submitted by mixed groups were accepted.

**Table 1 Breakdown of the studies according to types of research**

Type of research	N	Percentage accepted	Percentage rejected
Quantitative research	22	50%	50%
Qualitative research	13	54%	46%
Combined research	20	65%	35%
Action research	6	33%	67%
Theoretical research	5	100%	-
Total	66	58%	42%

**Table 2 Breakdown of the studies according to the researchers' academic degrees**

Researcher's degree	N	Percentage accepted	Percentage rejected
M.A.	8	38%	63%
Ph.D. + M.A.	16	56%	44%
Ph.D.	41	61%	39%
Ph.D. + Prof.	1	100%	-
Total	66	58%	42%

**Table 3 Breakdown of the proposals according to number of researchers**

No. of researchers	N	Percentage accepted	Percentage rejected
1	36	53%	47%
2	21	52%	48%
3	8	88%	13%
4	1	100%	-
Total	66	58%	42%

An examination of these data enables us to draw conclusions and examine the research channels, types of researchers, and fields studied. The study helped us reach conclusions regarding this project. For example, a decision was made to encourage the more intercollegiate studies, as well as to encourage studies in which experienced and inexperienced researchers collaborated, and so on. In addition, topics that are on the agenda and are important to the system, but do not have a place in the proposed research studies, were suggested. As a result, budgets were obtained and a call for system-based research on the required topics in the teacher education system was issued. Those are a few examples of examining the results of the research and of drawing conclusions from it.

### The third standard

*Inquire systematically into, and reflect on, their own practice, and demonstrate commitment to lifelong professional development.*

We have presented systematic research in parallel to the second standard, and the possibility of reflecting on one's teaching in parallel to the first standard.

We will present examples of commitment to lifelong professional learning. For years, the community of learners has maintained a variety of channels and opportunities for professional learning for various periods of time. Various possibilities for learning exist, from several-hour study sessions to professional specialization studies that last for two years and consist of one day of study per week. Study topics range from the topics that are taught in teacher education to professional topics that broaden the teacher educators' knowledge and abilities, as well as general enrichment topics. A follow-up of the study contents permits us to offer in-service courses dealing with those topics, by developing them in a linear, a spiral or a graduated structure. It is important to mention that the in-service courses are officially recognized and remunerated, resulting in a raise in teacher educators' salaries.

### The fourth standard

*Provide leadership in developing, implementing and evaluating programs for educating teachers that embrace diversity, and are rigorous, relevant and grounded in accepted theory, research and best practice.*

The community of colleagues operates a channel for writing study programs, which is placed at the disposal of the teacher educators. The various channels for writing that exist aim to enable teacher educators to transform their personal theoretical and practical knowledge into public knowledge that is available to the community of educators both in the colleges and in the field. Participation in the writing process and the publication of the end-products constitute a significant part of the writers' professional development. These channels permit the development of teaching units for teacher educators, books, and teacher educators' monographs. In the past fifteen years, over two hundred and fifty such units have been developed. The units are developed by experienced expert teacher educators and not by professional writers who are only involved in writing. The standards that are maintained in all the writing channels are as follows:

- Every writing procedure is accompanied by professional teams and pedagogic advisors from the outset until the completion of the product;
- Every written product undergoes a process of refereeing by expert readers in the particular field of knowledge;
- Every product includes theories of professional knowledge side by side with recommendations for practical application in learning situations.

Following are some interesting data that emerged from the research:

- 51% of the participants have twenty to twenty-five years of seniority in teaching
- 19% of the participants have twenty-six to thirty-one years of seniority in teaching.
- 20% of the participants have thirty-two or more years of seniority in teaching.
- All the others are young.

These data provide a great deal of information that enables the writing channels and their the way they operate to be examined.

### The fifth standard

*Collaborate regularly and in significant ways with representatives of schools, universities, state education agencies, professional associations and communities to improve teaching, learning, and teacher education.*

The very fact that a community of colleagues exists permits regular work with different bodies both separately and simultaneously. The following sessions take place in the community:

- Sessions between colleagues from different sectors and cultures;
- Sessions between various position-holders (inspectors, principals, mentor teachers);
- Sessions between researchers from different institution (by means of study days and virtual and international conferences)
- Sessions between various academic bodies
- Sessions with representatives of the Ministry of Education, and so on.

One example: In supervised evaluation research, the work of the P.D.S. network is investigated. This is a colleague-based network that links schools and colleges in the training processes of student teachers. The following participate in the network:

- 10 colleges
- 39 schools (27 elementary schools, 5 kindergartens, 7 junior high schools)
- 600 students and 300 mentor teachers

The network's activity is accompanied by the collaborative work of mentor teachers, school principals, pedagogic advisors, instruction centers in the colleges, representatives from academia, representatives from the Ministry of Education, and so on. This activity demonstrates the integral combination of several bodies and of various position-holders.

The data in this particular section of the research are being processed at the moment, with the result that we do not yet have findings that can be presented. It is important to point out that the activity of the network is supervised by a steering committee, the Ministry of Education has issued a special budget for it, and a book that presents the models of P.D.S. operation is about to be published.

### The sixth standard

*Serve as informed, constructively critical advocates for high-quality education for all students, public understanding of educational issues, and excellence and diversity in the teaching and teacher education professions.*

In each action of the community of colleagues one can find the 6<sup>th</sup> standard.

### The seventh standard

*Contribute to improving the teacher education profession.*

Dictionary definitions of the term "profession" all stipulate three fixed components that exist in every profession: 1. a body of solid knowledge with its own terms and concepts; 2. expert professional people who practice the profession; 3. long-term training processes that have to be undergone before practicing the profession. With regard to the first component – a body of

knowledge: For over twenty years, with the aim of accumulating and constructing professional knowledge, the community of learners has been involved in teacher education, and provides platforms for publishing the knowledge. With regard to the second component – expert practitioners – members of the profession are given a platform for professional development and specialization throughout their professional lifetimes by means of learning, development, writing and creation in the fields of teacher education. With regard to the third component – training for the profession: There is no official training for working in the profession, as is required in all other professions. Korthagen (2005) also mentions this and points out this lack. There is no prior training for the role, nor is there any obligatory training while performing this role – unless a local initiative is undertaken in one of the institutions of teacher education. As the situation stands today, teacher educators are required to have an academic education – but not a teaching certificate.

The findings of the study show how, on a system-wide and national scale, it is possible to work in and contribute to teacher education as a profession that has standards, despite the fact that obligatory official standards do not exist. Consequently, the list of standards for teacher education that was devised by the ATE organization for teacher education serves as the backbone for the study. The conclusions indicate the meticulous upholding of academic quality, professional peer learning, products that have undergone peer review, constant updating and innovation, and lifelong learning.

## References

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