

# Assessment Standards as a Subtext Reflecting the Professional Development of Newly Qualified Teachers

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## Introduction

Entry into the world of teaching is a complex process. In Israel, it begins even before the completion of four years of intensive training in which practice and theory of education go hand-in-hand. Internship, induction, takes place during the last year at college. The unique process of entry into the world of teaching becomes more meaningful in the first year of teaching and continues throughout the entire cycle of professional life. Part of this progression is still a mystery, holding a great deal of inexplicit knowledge. During the internship phase, the threshold stage, new teachers begin to develop their professional self-awareness and to determine their own professional standards. The National Assessment Standards evaluation is the first time that these Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) confront the desired standards for their teaching license. During this year of induction, we can find the underlying foundations of the yet unknown story of "becoming a teacher."

The rationale for this research derives from the assumption that teaching and learning standards have a great potential to serve as benchmarks for continuing self-improvement.

The research field was a virtual workshop, available on-line for the NQTs who could not attend the regular workshop. The virtual workshop required a weekly written report of every NQT and weekly feedback mediated by an expert mentor. "Taking a break" once a week, focusing on self reflections and thoughts, proved to be a productive practice that enabled NQTs to gain a better understanding of the process of their pedagogical decision-making and helped us, teacher educators, to be more effective and tuned in to their different needs.

In this research, we sought to find out whether there is a correlation between the criteria defined in the National Assessment Standards and the subjects reflected in the subtext of the students' weekly reports. The purpose was both to examine the adequateness and the relevancy of these criteria for NQTs and to find focal points characterizing the internship stage.

## Theoretical background

The field of teacher and teaching evaluation and assessment has been widely researched in recent years. Whilst examining the literature, we found that up to the 1960s, most of the research related to pupils. The leading subjects were defined as measurement and evaluation in education and dealt with evaluation of pupils. After the 1960s, this concept expanded and evaluation started referring to additional objects, primarily curricula and other educational projects (Nevo 1989, Globman 2005). Recently, we are witnessing an increasing interest in another evaluation object – the teacher (Whitehead 2000, Murray and Male 2005).

Nevo (1989) defines evaluation as the systematic gathering of information about the nature of the objects of evaluation and their qualities. This definition combines description and judgment, but discerns between the different natures of each. This being the case, educational evaluation is a systematic gathering of information related to the nature and quality of the objects of evaluation. Whitehead (2000) widens the field and adds the aspect of tracing and examining ways of acquiring knowledge. Evaluation findings present a comprehensive description of the objects and the processes involved in the professional occurrences.

Several educational systems, primarily in the United States, have developed complex tools both for evaluation of teachers prior to their receiving certification and getting a job and for the promotion and ongoing supervision of the teacher's work (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2004). In this context, it is important to point to the essence of that kind of evaluation, the approaches leading it and the concepts underlying the definitions of process evaluation (Manatt 2000, Hoban 2004, Kydd, Crawford and Riche 1999, Globman 2005). This gives rise to questions such as: Who is supposed to make the evaluation?

To who is the evaluation addressed? Who gets the evaluation data and what does he/she do with it? When is the evaluation being made? At the entry stage? During the process? At the end of the year? What components are included in the evaluation process? Do they involve evaluators at higher levels, peers or colleagues? To what extent is the appraised teacher involved? And more.

In the past, evaluation, essentially due to its aspiration for relevancy, was always directed to the client, the ministry of education, and the objective was to identify the decision-making process and provide a response to information needs. This approach was criticized for being too narrow and for the potential danger of evaluations made by "court evaluators." Today, evaluation is striving to be more relevant to all parties involved, including the teacher, and to preserve a level of objectivity as well (Bass, Anderson-Patton and Allender 2002, Murray and Male 2005). Transition from the narrow approach of the "clients' evaluation" to a broader approach of the "involved parties" is intended to expand the information base for the assessment.

Teachers' knowledge and skills are the basis of teaching. However, they are not enough for monitoring and creating the standards of good professional teaching (Bass, Anderson-Patton, and Allender 2002, Murray and Male, 2005). Shared commitment to ethical practice and a common core of knowledge are other important ingredients connecting the members of a profession. Common language and set of understandings and beliefs enable professionals to work together toward shared purposes. Educators must also share approval of the benchmarks and perspectives of the profession (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2004). Therefore, the standards are not analogous to generic or context-free teaching behaviors. On the contrary, standards are embedded in the context of teaching.

In conclusion, when we have an object of educational evaluation, we must not observe it only in terms of yields or results. In order to arrive at a better understanding in the full sense of its meaning, we must also examine the needs, goals, strategies, implementation processes and the social-political environment of the object of evaluation (Whitehead 2000, Hoban, 2004, Kydd, Crawford and Riches 1999). In our specific case, the object of evaluation is the performance of the NQTs. We believe that, in addition to formative and summative evaluations, information about different aspects of their professional development should be collected from NQTs own reflections on their teaching activities.

## The context

In Israel, teachers were, and to a large extent still are, evaluated primarily by official superintendents and teaching standards are still a kind of "taboo" within the system. The installation of the induction program as an obligatory phase within teacher education raised the subject of teachers' evaluation and the issue was discussed on several national committees. The result of these discussions was a formulation of two sets of evaluation forms: one for the middle of the year (a formative assessment tool) and the second, a set of standards, the National Assessment Standards (serving a summative evaluation for the teaching license). In this paper, we will focus on the criteria appearing in the summative evaluation for NQTs. We will try to see whether they are reflected in the NQTs weekly reports. It is important to emphasize that during the induction year the NQTs are not fully aware of those standards.

The dispositions reflected in the above mentioned belief, that assessment of teachers and teaching should include a wide range of information, provided the starting point for

articulating the Professional Teaching Standards (Globman 2005) in Israel. Common understanding of what constitutes effective teaching is communicated through criteria identified with five integral components of teaching. In this research, these components served as a basis for analyzing NQTs reflective journals.

The five integral components of teaching:

1. Teaching – mastering knowledge domains; being familiar with school programs; planning; keeping interest and attention; time-managing; designing learning environments; being able to adapt learning to differences among pupils; running current learning assessment.
2. Pupils' knowledge (achievements) – diagnosing pupil's abilities and needs; being aware of pupils' varieties; planning and teaching whilst addressing pupil differentiations; enhancing motivation and curiosity; tolerance.
3. Class management and educational duties – modeling; creating positive atmosphere; taking care of discipline and order; running social class meetings; communicating with the pupils and enhancing pupils' mutual communication; coping with discipline problems.
4. School involvement - modeling; maintaining school regulations; showing initiations; taking roles; taking part in professional team work.
5. Professional accountability – ethical behavior; accountability towards parents and community; responsibility to pupils; independent learning and professional development.

The shift towards performance-based standards in teacher education is in line with the new approach in the Israeli Education system on the whole. The committee that discussed and designed the assessment criteria is continuing to improve the evaluation form based on feedback from users involved in the induction year. In this research, we try to find out to what extent NQTs relate their weekly reports to the official standards of the induction program.

## Characteristics of the on-line workshops

The first induction year is characterized by emotional and professional crises. The expectation that an NQT should function like an expert teacher is a source of extreme tension and pressure on the beginner and calls for serious support. The designers of the internship program were fully aware of this and the model they created includes a compulsory workshop taught in the college by Expert Pedagogical Mentors (EPMs). That model enables the college to be deeply involved in the crucial entry stage and it also serves as an important tool both for supporting the NQTs and for evaluation of the training program. The workshop participants serve as a support group in which NQTs can give and receive emotional support and exchange experiences with peers and professional mentors. The differences in frameworks in which NQTs function raise a wide variety of problems that call for personal dialogue (Ballantyne 1995). This support is vital during the year in which "the shock of reality" and the ability to cope with difficulties determine professional survival (Whitehead 2000, Sergovani 2002, Murray and Male 2005).

One out of nine weekly workshops in a year is a virtual workshop, based mainly on an on-line interaction. In this workshop, the EPMs conduct individual weekly correspondence with each participant. In addition to that, the members of the online group had four group meetings during the year. On-line educational resources, developed especially for NQTs, were

also available for them (see link at the end of the references).

The main objectives of all induction workshops are as follows:

- To enable newly qualified teachers to cope with their new role under the difficult circumstances of ambiguity and constant change.
- To support the NQTs and empower their teaching abilities in order to enable them to provide support to their pupils.

The idea of offering a distance learning workshop was innovative and was raised in the first place mainly to solve problems of students who could not attend the regular workshop. However, it brought up several questions from various aspects such as:

1. What should be the criteria for participating?
2. Will it address the students need for a support group and interaction with peers?
3. Is it a really a workshop or just one-to-one dialogue?
4. Will the students use the distance learning as an excuse to "slip away" from the campus? What does it say about us, about their burden, if they do?
5. Do we have well trained staff for that kind of supervision?
6. Are there extra benefits or challenges in this kind of communication?
7. How shall we cope with the high expenses?

All of these questions are discussed within the faculty and specific regulations are constantly being designed and examined.

After three years of conducting virtual workshops, the feedback indicates that a consistent workshop structure can be developed across delivery formats but that some pedagogical adjustments may be required for the distance learning format. Some of the NQTs appear to enroll in the distance learning workshop because of convenience, but find it difficult to prepare a full written report of educational situations every week. On the other hand, it appears that one of the most significant benefits of such a workshop is the ongoing documentation of the process and the ability to analyze it on and off time. In many cases, it also causes NQTs to write weekly as a professional habit and then reflect on their experiences and their writing. The next paragraphs will present the method, the findings and the conclusion of this experience.

## Methodology

The leading paradigm of this research was a qualitative-constructivist approach that perceives the researcher as the main research instrument. Shkedi (2003) claims, that qualitative research is the only flexible tool suitable for the complexity, sensitivity, and the constantly changing reality characterizing the human experience.

This research was a descriptive case study, focusing on the individual action within a specific frame of reference (Yosifon 2001). The inherent possibilities in descriptive case studies are particularly relevant for answering the kinds of question posed in this research. The research concentrated on the analysis of 10 reflective teaching journals written by NQTs during their first year of teaching.

The tools for the data collections were mainly two kinds of written documents:

1. National Assessment Standards for NQTs

2. Written reports.

The first served as leading points sought in the written materials and the second provided documentation of NQTs' and mentors' correspondence. The journals are a kind of narrative which utilizes different forms of writing (stories, personal stories, letters, journals, biographies and more) to describe and better understand teachers' practical experiences. The analysis of the written products was focused on the facets of evaluation which the student teachers chose to record in their journals.

### The research population

The research population included 10 NQTs who had successfully completed the first three years of training in an Israeli Teacher Training College. They were scheduled to take their internship within their fourth year of study. During this year, the NQTs participated in an online workshop. They were required to keep personal reflective journals about their classroom experiences throughout their first year. The workshop leader, an Expert Pedagogical Mentor (EPM) wrote weekly feedback with comments and questions relating to the content. At the end of the year, each NQT submitted a final summary of the journals, the feedback and his/her insights and conclusions.

The sample population was random. Ten NQTs were chosen from about 88 participants of the on-line workshops held over the past two years. After the random selection was made, the sample became the reference group since the EPMs checked the weekly reports prepared by all of the teachers chosen throughout the entire year.

### Data collection and data analysis

The requirement to keep a reflective journal was a precondition for the online workshop. Reflective journal writing involves cognitive processes of observation, analysis, critical examination of events, inference, deduction and learning of lessons for the future (Kashti, Arieli and Shlasky 1997). Due to these characteristics, journal entries are a good source of information for experience processing (Birenboim 1997). Analysis of the journals was focused on identifying criteria of evaluation which student teachers used in describing the work of teaching.

The data were analyzed according to the inductive analysis system. Certain keywords and central concepts were derived from the data. The data were analyzed separately by three analysts on the basis of a full agreement between the researchers (Inter-Rater Agreement).

The entire analysis process involved several stages:

1. Collecting hidden and open information (from 240 weekly reports that were checked according to the five main components in the formal appraisal).
2. Creating a visual content map of the findings in order enable us to determine connections among the different data.
3. Making an interpretative analysis of the findings and recommending continued and additional research.
4. Suggesting points for improvement of the on-line workshop including new criteria or standards for the summative evaluation.

Analysis of the data was inductive, based on repetitive readings of the text. The focus was on "episodes", units of content each centered on a specific event or a specific reference which stands for itself in terms of content and context. These units were categorized with reference to the standards of summative evaluation which had been determined for the student teachers.

## Findings and discussion

We identified the five leading components of teaching as they appeared in the written reports and we refer to them as “story packages” and “patches of profession,” examples that contain within them a set of criteria that enhance professional self-awareness.

The findings showed that the issues presented in the intuitive writing encompass the subjects included in the formal standards and appear to be the subtext of the weekly reports. That finding might provide us with a better understanding of the professional development during the first year of teaching and point to the validity of the formal criteria.

We present here several quotations from the journals to exemplify NQTs’ references relevant to each of the different formal standards.

Teaching - trying new strategies:

*“I tried to teach in ways I know and with which I am familiar with. I like to brainstorm with the class on the subject matter. I ask questions and only afterwards write important things on the board... but they are used to what I consider much more boring work however I see they learn more... I write a summary on the board and they copy. I talk a little about it, ask questions of understanding and they do some of the questions in class...It could be that with regard to special education pupils it might not be a good idea to change things so fast...”*

*“In a lesson about the Holocaust, I read to the pupils a story from the viewpoint of a child in the Holocaust. The story taught us many things about the Holocaust and the children asked many questions.”*

Pupils’ knowledge (achievements) – trying to challenge the pupils

*“I am talking about the teacher’s ability to bring the subjects and the content closer to the content world of the pupils, and in that way to make learning more meaningful... by means of choosing texts which interest the pupils and at the same time raise their level... by choosing games which lead to experiential learning.”*

Class management and educational duties – coping with difficulties; mapping the class; experiencing frustration:

*“With regard to my desire to be more assertive in matters of discipline, I am always dealing with it with myself...”*

*“This week I tried two things: One day I entered the classroom and was very strict. I wrote down the names of all the pupils who disturbed the flow of the lesson and I found that this influenced some of the pupils and had little or no affect on others, the ones who are the center of the disturbances.”*

*“Yesterday, I entered the class and during the lesson, I directed questions to the pupils who are “in the center of things” and in that way I got their attention and gave their things importance.”*

*“Moreover, I have decided that I am not going to skim over things, that is to say, no eating in class, no wandering around in class, someone who can’t be in class needs to go outside to calm down and I just won’t ignore little things which I might not have paid attention to before and now I am more determined.”*

School Involvement – building self identity within the staff; presenting own position; finding room:

*“In the pedagogical meeting last week the classroom teacher and I saw things about his class very differently. He wasn’t well enough informed and I gave my report. After several days, I found out that the teacher had requested that the pupils not tell me anything. He is their teacher and if they have problems they should turn to him...”*

*“In the first days in the teachers’ room it was very difficult... I did not know where to sit...with whom to talk...but after a short while, about two weeks, I was asked to help prepare Rosh HaShana (the New Years holiday)...and suddenly I felt myself to be part of the team...”*

Professional Accountability – developing sense of belonging to the profession; self identity and worthy:

*“Overall, I really feel that I am “on the right wave”. I am more confident and, in spite of the hard work, I am satisfied with my work and I hope to continue this way.”*

*“The feeling of responsibility for my pupils, the worry that they will eat and drink, that their needs will be met, the explanations during the trip...and everything connected with it. My pupils were the greatest and the trip was nice.”*

*“Some of the girls really needed my support and the sense of security I gave them...that it would be ok and that they don’t need to worry about going up on stage and dancing... they didn’t win a prize but they had an good experience. I enjoyed it when some of the girls called me to encourage them and hugged me. I felt that, although I am sort of half a teacher for this class (I am a substitute for the classroom teacher), I am actually a fulltime educator, and this is very important to me.”*

It is important to remember that these standards appear as subtexts and not as direct answers to evaluation questions. In our opinion, this is, in itself, an interesting point worthy of investigation.

## Conclusion

Understanding teaching is a complex, multifaceted endeavor. Through the analysis of the NQTs we could discern that the core components of the profession are already embedded in their descriptions of their teaching experiences.

The NQTs examined each teaching situation from a perspective which included a wide spectrum of standards and evaluation criteria. This broad focus on teaching processes shows us that NQTs identify the complexity of the act of teaching and they are aware of the natural connections which entwine the different elements of teaching.

The very appearance of the formal standards in the NQTs unstructured journal might be considered as evidence that the committee which designed the areas for teaching standards has indeed identified the elements comprising the general picture of teaching and education for new teachers.

It is also obvious that the reflective teaching journal is an effective tool for gathering information about the NQTs work processes and for the development of reflective capabilities (Birenboim 1997).

Reflective journal writing is defined as a cognitive process comprised of observation of events (by the NQTs), beliefs, thoughts and values (Whitehead, 2000) from the writer’s past, analysis and critical and judgmental examination of events, drawing of conclusions and learning for the future (Kashti, Arieli and Shlasky 1997).

The examples that were both explicit and implicit during the mentoring process have the potential of helping to reveal parts of the mystery of becoming a teacher, probably a better teacher.

## Summative remarks

The teaching profession can establish reasonable expectations for teachers at different points in their careers. These "benchmark performances" then define and monitor the performance levels expected of teachers with respect to the standards.

The appropriate distinctions between beginning and advanced practice are in the degrees of sophistication teachers exhibit in the application of knowledge and in the breadth and depth of knowledge, rather than in the kind of knowledge or practice required. Advanced practitioners have enriched their repertoire and the ability to deal simultaneously with more of the complex facets of the teaching context. NQTs feel and describe their teaching activities with flexibility and adaptability, and a highly developed capacity to integrate their understandings.

Beginning teachers must have the knowledge and understandings defined in the standards, as well as the resources available to refine their skills. It is, therefore, incumbent on the educational system and the professionals and policy-makers therein, to provide support and opportunities for beginning teachers to develop their abilities (Globman 2005).

A most important by-product of the virtual workshop was the mentors' professional development. EPMs had to study and invent new ways of mentoring and to make constant reflection on-action and in-action (Schon 1983, 1991) finding creative solution to current needs and problems were inherent part of their work. This aspect should get more attention in further research.

This paper demonstrates that NQTs must enter the profession with the potential to address the many facets of curriculum, classroom and student life, as well as a commitment to professional development, professional responsibility and their own professional self-awareness. We could read about this in almost every NQT report. It emerged from every reflective thought that they shared with us.

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Website for the Israeli Teacher Induction program ([www.education.gov.il.staj](http://www.education.gov.il.staj)).

Links of interest (Heb): A virtual conference February 2004

<http://ole.macam.ac.il/lecture/17-2-04/#link0>

<http://ole.macam.ac.il/lecture/17-2-04/#link2>

<http://ole.macam.ac.il/lecture/17-2-04/#link5>

<http://portal.macam.ac.il/articlepage.aspx?id=518>

