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Teacher Educations:
not Only Concerned
for Curricula Implementations

Ainat Guberman[1]
The MOFET Institute, Tel Aviv, Israel; David Yellin Academic College of Education, Jerusalem, Israel
ORCID: 0000-0002-9513-5367
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# The MOFET Institute: Professionalizing Teacher Educators' Work

ABSTRACT: The MOFET Institute has three goals: 1. providing professional development for teacher educators, 2. developing initiatives in teacher education, and 3. conducting policy-relevant research. This paper describes how MOFET strives to attain each of these goals. MOFET offers professional development for teacher educators in areas such as second order teaching, mentoring, curriculum development and research. It has Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Research and Development (R&D) units that collaborate with policymakers to introduce changes and initiatives into the (teacher) education system. These are closely monitored by formative evaluation studies.

Furthermore, as an inter-institutional organization, MOFET is a meeting place for teacher educators from all over the country, MOFET enables them to improve their professional knowledge, consolidate shared professional principles and collaborate in shaping the educational realities and in influencing policies. This paper proposes that establishing similar institutions in other countries could significantly contribute to counteracting neo-liberal de-professionalizing forces directed at teacher education.

KEY WORDS: Teacher educators, Professional development, Professional learning, Teacher education policy.

## Introduction

The Israeli Ministry of Education (MoE) established The MOFET[2] Institute in 1983 to provide professional development for teacher educators.

[1] Dr. Ainat Guberman is Head of The MOFET Institute's Research Authority.

[2] The name MOFET is an acronym for "research and program development". It means "best model" in Hebrew.

Positioned at the nexus between the academia, the educational system and the MoE, the MOFET Institute added two goals to the original one: developing innovative initiatives in the area of teacher education, and conducting research to provide policymakers with policy-relevant evidence. This paper describes how MOFET strives to achieve each of these three goals and explains the relevance of MOFET's model to teacher educators' professional roles and status worldwide.

## Supporting the Professional Development of Teacher Educators

The idea that teacher educators form a professional group distinct from teachers emerged during the last decades of the 20th century. This position was strengthened by research papers that described how newly recruited teacher educators had to adjust to their new roles and acquire new knowledge and skills they did not have nor need when they were still teachers (cf. Berry, 2007; Murray & Male, 2005; Meeus et al., 2018). Those roles include, but are not limited to 1. Second order teaching, i.e. teaching about teaching and learning and teaching how to teach. 2. Mentoring or coaching student teachers. 3. Gatekeeping of the teaching profession. 4. Curriculum development. 5. Brokering between higher education institutions, schools and other stakeholders, and 6. Research (Lunenberg et al., 2014; Meeus et al., 2018). Although not all teacher educators perform all of these roles, they are typical of teacher educators' work. These roles rely on broad practical and theoretical knowledge bases that require preparation as well as career-long learning. Nonetheless, these roles should not be perceived as a "blueprint" model that teacher educators must comply with. Teacher educators' roles are context dependent and evolve over time (Kelchtermans et al., 2018; Lunenberg et al., 2014).

The MOFET Institute provides teacher educators with a multitude of opportunities for professional learning. These opportunities address mainly four roles of teacher educators: second order teaching, mentoring, curriculum development and research (Lunenberg et al., 2014; Meeus et al., 2018). MOFET's School for Professional Specialization in Teacher Education offers annual and bi-annual learning programs in subjects that are of current general interest. These subjects are updated from time to time. Currently, there are programs in research and evaluation, personal and academic writing, academic mentoring, neuro-pedagogy, digital pedagogy, and change management and educational entrepreneurship. Short courses are offered in specific research methods and pedagogical issues as well. PhD students can participate in an annual program that introduces them to different career options that are available to

academics in education. MOFET has two programs that offer mentoring in research to beginning researchers. One of them is a postdoctoral program that offers participants individual mentors and group support, whereas the other invites beginning researchers to join research teams led by a senior researcher. Experienced researchers can apply to MOFET's applied research fund. Teacher educators who are expecting promotion to senior positions can participate in MOFET's fully funded bi-annual academic leadership program. MOFET's information center conducts literature reviews that are open to the public, and operates an online portal of academic contents in education and teacher. These help teacher educators to access academic publications in their areas of Interest, and design learning materials for student teachers. MOFET has a publishing house and a peer refereed journal in which teacher educators can publish their studies. Finally, MOFET organizes academic professional conferences and study-days in education and teacher education (some of them are international).

MOFET's professional development activities enable teacher educators from different institutions to get to know each other, have informal conversations and form collaborations in research and in curriculum development. In addition, MOFET supports and hosts Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015) where teacher educators, who hold similar senior positions within their respective institutions, meet to develop practices and suggest supporting policies in their area. A few of those communities were successful in achieving far-reaching changes in the Israeli education system (Guberman et al., 2021). For example, one Community of Practice, which consisted of heads of support centers for student teachers with learning disabilities, conceptualized standard operating principles for the support centers in different institutions. Furthermore, they expanded the support centers' mandate from assisting student teachers with learning disabilities to helping students with multiple disabilities studying at higher education institutions, as well as coordinating the services they receive with a wide array of stakeholders. These actions included changing the state as well as the institutional regulations concerning the rights of students with disabilities.

## Developing Innovative Initiatives in Teacher Education

The MOFET Institute has a broad range of Research and Development (R&D) units that promote initiatives in teacher education in full collaboration with the MoE. Five examples of R&D units that address different phases in teachers' careers are described below.

### Introducing Non-cognitive Selection Criteria for Student Teacher Candidates

Currently, selection of student teacher candidates is based on their prior high-school and\or academic achievements. However, successful teaching is also about nurturing relationships with school students. Many studies show that addressing school students social, emotional and educational needs is essential for their engagement in learning (Pianta at al., 2012). Therefore, teacher candidates' selection should also consider personality characteristics that indicate appropriate nurturing abilities. A reliable and valid selection process can save time and financial resources, provide school students with adequate teachers and prevent the frustration of candidates and school staff when those inept for teaching enter the education system. On that account, the Ministry of Education asked the MOFET Institute to develop a comprehensive selection battery for teacher education candidates, named MESILA[3]. In addition to measuring cognitive abilities, this battery includes measures of non-cognitive dimensions that are aligned with the criteria the MoE uses to evaluate practicing teachers (Goldenberg & Niv, 2023). Developing such a selection battery is in line with teacher educators' gatekeeping role (Lunenberg et al., 2014; Meeus et al., 2018).

The MESILA selection battery is based upon a multi-trait multi-method matrix: each desired trait is evaluated by a multitude of measures, and each measure supplies relevant data for a multitude of traits. For example, the group-performing task measures teamwork, tolerance, initiative and responsibility. Conversely, the trait 'teamwork' is measured by biographical and personality questionnaires in addition to the group performance task. Teacher education candidates participate in 'candidate evaluation' days in which experienced teacher educators who received special training for the task evaluate them. Inter-judge reliability is continually monitored.

A pilot study performed in 2016 and 2017 followed 97 first year students over two years. It found that the typical (cognitive) admission criteria, as well as the MESILA battery, predicted students' second year grade average, as well as their pedagogical advisors' evaluations concerning their 'suitability for teaching'. However, only the MESILA battery predicted students' grades on the supervised practicum (in both years), as well as student attrition. Student teachers, as well as assessors, reported that they felt the battery was

[3] The name MESILA is an acronym for "screening tests for teaching candidates". The word means "track" in Hebrew.

fair and relevant to teaching. During 2020 and 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted an adaptation of the battery for online dissemination. To date, over a thousand teacher candidates were evaluated by the MESILA battery. Today, this evaluation is compulsory for student teachers in special accreditation routes, however its high cost precludes its use to screen all teacher education candidates (Goldenberg & Niv, 2023).

### Reducing Beginning Teachers' 'Reality Shock'

Beginning teachers often feel disorientated and disappointed when they start teaching. This feeling is termed the 'reality shock' (Veenman, 1984). Studies suggest that this phenomenon emanates from the large gap between the realities student teachers encounter while they are still studying and those they face as teachers in the education system. Beginning teachers are expected to be 'classroom ready', to adjust their conduct to the school's norms, and to bring their students to high achievements even if positioned in particularly challenging classrooms. Feeling professionally incompetent and unable to attain the goals set for them and by themselves as teachers, attrition rates of beginning teachers are high (Veenman, 1984). In contrast, factors that support teachers' retention are initial teacher education programs that include extensive mentored practices in teaching, by mentor teachers, through principal's encouragement, and supportive work conditions such as reduced workload (den Brok et al., 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2014).

The MOFET Institute is continuously trying to improve beginning teachers' induction and retention. Over fifteen years ago, one of MOFET's Communities of Practice adapted the Professional Development School partnership model to initial teacher education in Israel. According to this model, student teachers are heavily involved in all aspects of the school in which they do their practicum, and the main stakeholders: student teachers, cooperating teachers and teacher educators are all engaged in professional learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This model developed into a state funded project called the Academy-Classroom program, and its R&D unit is located at MOFET. The unit monitors stakeholders' satisfaction with the program and suggests policy changes that could improve the project's outcomes. However, the Professional Development School partnership model, including the Academy-Classroom program, can only improve teachers' preparation. They cannot bridge the reality gap between Professional Development Schools and the particular schools that absorb beginning teachers, nor can they improve the induction process.

In Israel, beginning teachers are assigned a school-based mentor teacher and they participate in an academic workshop where they share their experiences and receive teacher educator's support. In order to improve beginning teachers' induction, the teachers' induction R&D unit at MOFET supports two initiatives: 1. establishing Multi-Player Induction Teams (MITs) and 2. appointing MoE district guides to oversee the induction of each beginning teacher. The first initiative – MITs is essentially beginning teachers' workshops that take place either at their schools or at the local authority. The workshops bring together beginning teachers with other stakeholders such as mentor teachers, school principals, and district supervisors. Representatives of the absorbing schools, the MoE and the local authority are included in the MIT's steering committee.. This arrangement raises stakeholders' awareness of beginning teachers' needs and their own responsibility to provide work conditions conducive of retaining beginning teachers. This setting empowers beginning teachers because as a group they have the power to introduce changes and contribute to their schools and communities instead of just adapting to the existing system and reproducing current teaching practices. The MITs project received two grants from the EU Erasmus+ program: one in 2016–2019 (PROTEACH) and another one, for preparing mentors to work in MITs in 2020-2023 (PROMENTORS). The second initiative – district guides is a very recent policy. In view of the importance of mentoring and the absorbing school's climate (Orland-Barak, 2016; Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2020), the proposed role of the district-based guides r includes reaching out to beginning teachers, providing them with professional and bureaucratic assistance, ensuring that the school provides adequate mentoring, and that the school principals are aware of beginning teachers' needs.

### Teachers' Professional Learning Communities

Teachers' Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) consist of teachers who meet regularly to examine their professional knowledge and practices, with the goal of improving them. PLC members engage in open, reflective and critical examination of their current practices, experiment with new forms of teaching and collect data concerning their students' learning. This data, combined with extensive reading of the professional literature, are the basis for critical examination and future attempts to improve classroom practices. During the last decades, PLCs are regarded as the preferred model for professional development in education (Stoll et al., 2006).

In 2016, the Israeli MoE launched a national program to develop Professional Learning Communities as frameworks for teachers' professional

development. 'Leading teachers', who are experienced teachers, facilitate the communities. They receive extensive professional preparation and on-the-job support. There are three types of PLCs and their R&D units are located at MOFET: 1. Communities that tackle general educational issues, such as students' motivation or assessment. They consist of teachers and lead teachers who work at the same school. 2.Homeroom teachers' PLCs. 3. PLCs focused on disciplinary studies. These PLCs are organized on a regional basis and often operate online (Berglas-Shapiro, 2018).

### Promoting Inter-cultural Competence: TEC Center and TESFA

Israeli society is highly diversified according to different religions, immigration backgrounds and ethnic identities. The education system itself is divided into three public school systems: pluralistic Hebrew-speaking system, Arabic speaking system and Jewish religious system, and an independent Ultra-orthodox school system. The MOFET Institute (and most of the Israeli higher education institutions) serves teacher educators from all four systems. School students and teachers in each of the systems rarely meet those outside their sector in social circumstances. As a result, prejudice and negative stereotypes flourish. To promote intercultural competence within the public education system, MOFET operates two R&D units – the TEC center and Tesfa ('*hope*' in Amharic).

The TEC (Technology, Education, and Cultural diversity) center established in 2005 transferred to MOFET in 2011. The Center collaborates with education colleges across Israel, particularly in the periphery, offering an opportunity for students at different education colleges and from different cultures to learn together via the Internet. The participants use synchronous and asynchronous tools in mixed multicultural groups to create learning and teaching materials, and experience advanced teaching environments, such as virtual worlds. Gradually, the learning process builds trust between group members from different sectors (Walther et al., 2015). Each year, the Center's courses attract more than 1,000 students from 20 Jewish and Arab Academic Colleges around the country. Alumni of the TEC center go on to implement the TEC Model in their own schools: more than 100 schools and 30,000 students each year.

The Tesfa R&D unit was established about fifteen years ago to promote the integration of teachers and principals of Ethiopian descent into the education system. While many immigrant communities face cultural differences and discrimination, Ethiopian-descended Jews experience unique challenges due to their skin color and an absence of continuous historical

relationships with other Jewish communities in the diaspora. Today, although official policies prohibit discrimination, Israeli citizens of Ethiopian-descent are over-represented in the lowest socioeconomic strata and report that they often confront implicit or explicit expressions of racism (Semyonov et al., 2015). The rate of Ethiopian-descended educators in Israeli schools is 0.4%, corresponding to merely a quarter of their share of the population (MoE, 2020). Ethiopian-descended teachers' annual rate of transition between schools is 31.4%, compared with only 5.6% among Israeli teachers in the population at large (MoE, 2020), suggesting that they experience significant difficulties in finding permanent jobs and integrating into schools.

The late Dr. Hagit Mishkin was the head of the Tesfa R&D unit since 2019. The unit provides student and novice teachers of Ethiopian descent with skills and support in three main areas: academic learning, educational leadership, and multiculturalism. During her term, the number of Ethiopian-descended teachers entering and persevering in the education system has more than doubled. Research conducted in the unit found that the integration of teachers of Ethiopian descent into schools is dependent on school principals' and parents' attitudes more than on the teachers' knowledge and skills (Avraham & Mishkin, 2023; Guberman et al., 2024). Based on this evidence, Dr. Mishkin was able to convince policymakers to divert funds from supporting Ethiopian-descended teachers' preparation and absorption to the encouragement of multiculturalism and diversity in schools and in teacher education institutions. At the time of her death, the unit focused on raising inter-cultural awareness in the education system, and on increasing the number of school principals of Ethiopian descent. Dr. Hagit Mishkin was brutally murdered by Hammas terrorists on October 7, 2023. May she rest in peace.

### Implementing Technology in Teacher Education

The R&D unit for technology and innovation in education works to spread new knowledge and ideas in the Israeli education system. The unit conducts synchronous and asynchronous courses on techno-pedagogy; most of them are open to the public on MOFET's site. It trains leading teacher educators who promote the use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence, in teacher education colleges and in professional development centers for in-service teachers. Finally, the unit promotes initiatives and innovation in the field of techno-pedagogy.

## Conducting Policy-relevant Studies

MOFET's Communities of Practice (CoP) and R&D units are sites of collaboration between policymakers and teacher educators from all of the country's teacher education institutions. MOFET's information center provides the CoP with literature reviews to assist the design of new initiatives, and the Research Authority helps them conduct formative evaluation studies that are useful in improving and adapting the implementation of new initiatives as well as relevant policies. Thus, MOFET's policy-influencing research projects are part of broader, long-lasting frameworks of collaboration. The continuous and ongoing communication between teacher educator researchers and teacher education policymakers helps to develop a shared language, a mutual understanding, and trust (Oliver & Cairney, 2019), and eliminates the need to "mobilize" research-based knowledge to policymakers (Zeichner & Conklin, 2016). Generally speaking, policymakers are more interested in the practical aspects of research findings, whereas the researchers are also interested in the theoretical implications of their work, yet both parties are deeply involved in improving the educational system.

A recent study that looked into research projects that MOFET conducted for policymakers (Guberman et al., 2024) found that policymakers' trusted the researchers' methodological decisions and findings. Most of the recommendations that policymakers implemented were of small-scale, refining existing programs, and uncontroversial (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). Nonetheless, their gradual and incremental effects were far reaching.

## Bringing Together Teacher Educators' Knowledge, Actions and Research

The three goals of the MOFET institute support each other. Updating teacher educators' professional knowledge is necessary for developing innovative initiatives, and both of them rely on research. At MOFET, teacher educators learn together, throughout their career. Beginning teacher educators acquire skills that are necessary for their roles, whereas veteran teacher educators conduct work as mentors, introduce initiatives and conduct policy-influencing research.

In an era when global neo-liberal trends dominate much of the public discourse in relation to education and teacher education, collaboration among teacher educators is necessary to replace professional accountability with

professional responsibility (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, Mayer, 2021; Vanassche, 2023). Instead of abiding with regulations determined by powerful stakeholders from 'outside', teacher educators are called to critically reflect upon their practices vis-a-vis current policies and social realities and make full use of their professional capabilities to enact their commitment to social justice and equity. As an inter-institutional organization, MOFET is a meeting place for teacher educators from all over the country, enabling them to improve their professional knowledge, consolidate shared professional standpoints and collaborate in shaping the educational realities and influencing policies. Establishing similar institutions in other countries could significantly contribute to counteracting de-professionalizing forces directed at teacher education.

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