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Training Excellent Teachers
Innovation, Involvement and
Educational Leadership

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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### Training Excellent Teachers Innovation, Involvement and Educational Leadership

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#### **Abstract**

Excellent teachers are outstanding people who are not only gifted and highly intelligent in all aspects, but also those who are able to perceive the personality of their students as well as understand their thoughts and feelings; teachers who serve as educational leaders who are venerated by their students, and are able to correlate reality with knowledge.

In recent times, we have been contending with the deterioration of teachers' skills, being exposed to their low level of intelligence and superficial personalities. Is this because we have lost our confidence in our educational values and ethics? Is it because the low salaries teachers receive on the one hand, and the high-technology methodologies, on the other hand, which divert teachers from their calling?

How can we revive the teachers' excellent status and make them our social and cultural mentors once again?

In my opinion three major changes need to be made: First, the standard of selection of students and acceptance to the colleges of education should be raised, and candidates with higher grades, special talents and compatibilities to become excellent teachers should be preferred. Second, we should increase the level of their disciplinary studies and their pedagogical practices, and at the same time ensure that they will be taught and trained by outstanding lecturers and skilled innovative mentors, who will be able to bring out the best in them. Third, it is important to make the studies of these students relevant to their political and social existence in addition to their academic studies. Future teachers should be active on campus and be involved with their community needs.

This paper introduces some innovative points of view and educational aspects concerning the training of excellent teachers as educational leaders who are involved not only in the academic aspects of their studies, but in the cultural, political and social environment as well.

**Key words:** Excellent teachers; Innovation and Involvement; Educational leaders

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Education systems throughout the world are desperately lacking in excellent teachers and the need to raise teaching standards, especially because of rapid technological developments offering "alternative" teaching methods in the fields of communication, such as the Internet, make the role of teachers, public libraries and tutors in the learning process inferior. In such a situation, the role of the 'mythological educator' is no longer considered as being essential. Furthermore, teaching staff and head teachers are required to cope with complex social and cultural phenomena demanding a variety of skills other than professional and pedagogical, such as dealing with violence, concentration disorders and special needs, with post-traumatic reactions to military actions, destruction and death, sexual abuse in the family and in the environment, the increasing use of drugs and alcohol, and aspects of ethnic and religious racism. Excellent teachers, therefore, are required to be multidisciplinary to cope with social, criminological, psychological and national issues while developing their teaching abilities under conditions in most educational institutions that do not make possible finding solutions for these tribulations. Now more than ever it is necessary to find outstanding teachers, leading educators, who will bring about a revolution in the educational system and the process of fostering the character of the future, especially within the complex reality of Israel, with its intricate political, social and economic problems. Excellent teachers will be able to carry out their tasks in a suitable manner within an educational system lacking a unified policy and core plans relevant to all pupils. Such teachers will be able to raise the standard of general achievements and the fostering of aptitudes and the ability of original thinking of pupils in the subjects they study, on the one hand, and will have a considerable influence on the abundance of mediocrity, indolence and apathy, on the other. How can such teachers be created?

Excellent teachers are exceptional persons who consider their profession not only a mission, with the power to change the education of the future generation, but also are involved in the defense of the nation and the state in its national and cultural aspects. Their uniqueness is expressed by unexceptional diligence, devotion and commitment over and above that demanded in official circles, as well as exceptional personality. Their profile is adapted to the culture and environment within which they are employed and within which they are able to adapt their theoretic, professional and practical knowledge to the existing reality, without compromising the standard and quality of the existing work conditions no matter what they are (Kasher, 2003).

The excellence of the teachers is evident in their ability to relate to their students beyond the grades they attain, but rather to recognize their internal needs and be able to foster their personalities, to be an example that will lead them to broader visions beyond the obligations of examinations and average grades, which will fashion them as admirable enlightened persons, motivated to personal innovation and gifted with courage and aptitudes to develop critical thought in social, political and philosophical areas.

The distressing situation in Israel shows that the majority of teacher training colleges are judged by the standard of teaching and training in the

universities, and thus their graduates are evaluated as mediocre and lower. Furthermore, the achievement standards of their pupils, the fostering of their talents and intellectual, social personalities and their activities are much below international standards. Is this the result of political motives, or perhaps the outcome of the unresolved military situation we are facing? Is it the result of low wages teachers are paid and their inferior status within the population, or is it the accelerated development of technology which offer attractive alternatives? How is it that we have lost faith in the educational system and no longer conceive of it as a valued mainstay for the advancement of future generations? Will we be able to restore to the teachers their respect and the hope for a drastic change in education that will create the 'excellent teacher' whom we hope for?

In this paper, I will examine the ways by which excellent teachers can be created and how an answer can be provided to the stringencies existing in the field of education in a situation so perplex and morally and ethically problematical. I will begin with a theoretical review describing the present situation in the field of recruiting outstanding young women and men as educators, and guiding them toward excellence, in Israel and in other countries. I will then examine the process of the significant change that has come about in the Program for Training Excellent Teachers recently.—One fact is commonly agreed upon: the quality and personality of teachers affect the standard of their pupils' achievements and increases the possibility of rehabilitation of the education system, of the community's values, and the creation of a more desirable environment in which to live (Zozovski, Donitza-Shmidt, 2005).

In most modern states, including Israel, there is a crisis relating to recruitment of excellent students as educators as well as the phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession only a few years after they have completed their studies and begin working in schools (Zeidenberg, 2008; Ariav, 2009). As the result of low wages and inadequate working conditions, as compared with status in other professions, there is a decline in numbers of outstanding persons joining the teaching profession. This situation forces the directors of seminars and higher education institutions which train teachers, to lower the admission standards for students, to moderate the classification tests and not just to compromise the acceptance of students with low grades, but to accept persons whose prospect of being suitable teachers is slight. Furthermore, the numbers of teachers leaving the profession is increasing considerably. The shortage of teachers has demanded a basic examination of the type of persons applying to become teachers and their suitability professionally, as well as their personality (Yogev & Kfir, 2008). As the standard of applicants is reduced, the possibility of outstanding pupils succeeding in schools in which the teachers are mediocre is reduced, and the achievements of these pupils decline. The education system is held responsible for continuing to accept unsuitable applicants as teachers whose grades did not enable them to be accepted at institutions of higher education (Ketzin & Shkedi, 2011).

Dan Clement Lortie (1975) defined two factors in the process of selection of the teaching profession: one derives from the facilitating motives such as the

influence of their teachers or positive learning experiences in the past, and those who have a personal disposition for the field of education, social work and other care professions, especially with children (Albeck 1983). The second factor derives from the motives that attract them to work in this profession such as a feeling of mission satisfying and suitable to their personality, as well as the wages and workplace conditions and the possibility of advancement. These are decisive in the decision making process to become teachers (Rosenholtz, 1989).

According to Nisan (Nisan, 1987, 2001, 2006), the internal as well as external motives do not encompass all the motivating components in the process of selection of teaching. Consideration must also be given to the 'assumption of worthiness' in this decision based on a moral and ethical conception and upon the understanding that certain modes of behavior are carried out they are considered as worthy of following, even if they do not receive return of their value. The selection of the teaching profession is not made for the sake of expediency but because of a moral decision considered as a social and national 'mission'. Although during the past decade there has been a considerable decline in the number of applicants for teaching positions, the past few years has seen an increase in the number of persons of high caliber turning to teaching as a profession and with a perception of social mission. At the same time they are faced by conditions of acceptance being more difficult and having to pass demanding examinations during the course of training (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). It should be stressed that even on the completion of the complex stages of assessment and suitability, there is still a 10% dropout during the first year in teacher training institutions, and another 10% during the second year (Adair; Chiaverina, 2000).

As a result of reforms introduced into the education system during the past decade as well as the reduction of the number of pupils in each class, encouragement of older teachers to retire, fostering personal ties with the individual pupil, it appears that the number of teachers required has been doubled or more (Darling Hammond, et. al, 1999; Baratz Snowden, 2007). From the 1990s and up to recent years, the Israel Ministry of Education has been attempting to construct an excellence program in teacher training colleges with the purpose of improving the quality of teaching (Kfir & Ariav, 2004; Zozovsky & Donitza-Shmidt, 2005). The number of these institutions has increased from 8 in 2005 to 26 in 2010, and the number of applicants from 12,000 to 35,000. A large number of persons at mediocre or low levels have applied for teaching. Half of them leave the field of education immediately on completion of their studies, and many more during the first years of working as teachers (Kfir & Ariav, 2008). The Program for Training Excellent Teachers in academic institutions for education in Israel began as an experimental project in 1998 and in 2002 was given recognition as a permanent program. During the years 2005-2012, innumerable changes were made with the object of raising its level, to attract students for teaching with high levels of ability, and train them in a special high quality program to become leading teachers, outstanding educators and educational mentors. (Liebmann & Zelikovicz, 2009). From the

modest number of 73 excellent students in 6 teacher training colleges in 1999, the number of students in the excellence program in 2013 increased to 1,200 in 22 colleges. 85% of graduates of this program are teaching and are content with their work in the schools, and 20% are continuing studying towards a second degree in education, as compared with only 6% among students not in this program (Cohen, Abady, Lev Ari & Greenfeld, 2009; Klavir, 2012). Conditions of acceptance include a grade of a total of 630 points composed of results of the psychometric examination and average grades of all subjects passed in the university entrance examinations, a personal interview by the mentors of the program to test compatibility to the program, professionally and pedagogically. A further interview is carried out by the head of the excellence program to examine the student's commitment and standards. Today, the Program for Training Excellent Teachers operates in most teacher training colleges. The teacher's role is also considered as being responsible for the attainment of his/her students of high grades and their meeting the requirements of the Ministry of Education (Greenfeld, 2010).

Research papers (Klavir & Cohen, 2009; Biadssa, 2010) have shown that students with high intellectual ability who have been trained in the excellence programs and have systematically and professionally gained experience during the course of their studies have become teachers of outstanding pupils. Pupils of teachers with the highest grades in the entrance examinations to teacher training colleges in Israel have attained high grades in reading and other basic subjects.

We now return to the critical issue of assessment and acceptance tests for teaching as one of the stages that demand revolutionary change to create a vanguard of excellent educators (Ketko, 2011). The need to classify candidates for teaching in the most efficient and professional manner requires 'predictive tools' for their achievements upon the completion of their studies and the process of integration into the field of education (Milgram, 1978; Orter, 1981; Zak & Kremer, 1981; Gardner, 1983). Further tests are required beyond those existing, in order to implement the assessment process more accurately and responsibly (Jencks, 1972; Goleman, 1995; Evans, 2011). Regarding this, two approaches can be discerned: the first sees the cognitive intellectual dimension as the main factor and the second approach sees the behavioral personality dimension factor as most important and decisive regarding the prediction of these students to become excellent teachers.

Recently the possibility has been considered of introducing additional reception procedures following upon the first assessment, with the purpose of preventing the acceptance of unsuitable candidates (Arnon, Fraenkel & Rubin, 2012). It can be said with certainty that we are witnessing the beginning of changing attitudes to the 'teaching profession' and the necessity of fostering excellent teachers: a number of research papers have appeared recently in Israel and in many other countries on the subject of the assessment process and prediction in teacher training colleges whose conclusions show unequivocally that the existing assessment tests alone are insufficient and that additional skills and the existence of 'numerous other intelligence aspects' in the candidate's

personality must be examined (Gal-Or & Ben Sira, 1987; Goldenberg & Halabi, 1999). The findings of this research show that in relating to the various categories by which the candidates have been tested and evaluated, it can be seen that there are traits that have been perceived as suited to teaching, such as written and oral expression, intellectual abilities and general knowledge and that there is a significant correlation between them and success on the completion of the students' training (Zidenberg, 2008; Klavir, 2009). The majority of research papers reveal that exclusive programs in teacher training colleges are the order of the day: the framework of studies and pedagogic experience will enable the excellent teachers program provide the solution to the loss of value of life, its significance and objectives, in contradiction to uncontrollable addiction to technology, fame, riches and aggression that has become an alternative to educational tradition and basic human values.

A program for the training of excellent teachers has been in existence since 1998 at the Kibbutzim College of education, the largest college in Israel and the first to introduce the enterprising idea of training excellent teachers in an exclusive course. The core of the idea that directed the initiators of this project, and which still guides those involved in it, is the belief that investment in recruiting and training students with outstanding academic qualifications will raise the prestige of the teaching profession, will favorably compare its status with the most prestigious professions and will bring about a drastic change in the standard of teaching in Israel.

From the outset, a research survey of the program has been carried out tracing the processes of change that have come about and the extent of the project's influence on the participants, the standards of their assimilation into the education system upon completion of training. The data obtained in this survey shows that the achievements of the excellent students at the Kibbutzim teachers training college and their involvement in campus life, is superior to the functioning of other students at the college. It has also become evident that in comparison with other students, those students who participated in the excellence program have been motivated to continue studies towards a further degree (Liebmann & Zelikovicz, 2009).

It soon became apparent to the heads of the education system in Israel, that in order to attain higher learning standards of pupils, it would be necessary to take drastic steps leading to excellence in teaching without compromise. The program is based on four aspects of training: personal, social, national and universal. The idea is to consider the fulfillment of the teacher's personal potential as an investment in the environment in which she/he teaches (Shulman & Sherin, 2004) and to foster 'intelligent communities' in the teachers' common rooms in accordance with the subjects they teach and their interests. The teacher can thus develop within a framework of excellence which makes possible the realization of the personal, collective and organizational potential wherever she/he will be. To this were added a number of areas to raise the required standards related to the time tables, the content of the academic courses, duration of practical experience and the extent of their exposure within the school, and the various levels of Israeli society.

Since 2011, further improvements have been introduced to the training excellent teachers program: Candidates were interviewed to ascertain their aptitude to the different tracks, as well as a personal interview by the program director to test their ability to express themselves, their orientation to current events in the cultural and intellectual world and the extent of their commitment to education. The curriculum of the new training program consists of a further 12 hours of exclusive courses for excellent teachers. Many of the courses are of a scientific nature and are held in the form of seminars which include field experiences, methodological analysis and writing research papers. In lieu of this, the excellence program students are required to commit themselves to be employed as teachers for a period of three years on completion of their studies. To this end, the most outstanding teachers at the Training College are selected and are given special training, an understanding of the purpose of the program and the requirements and degree of investment as trainers of these special students. During the course of their practical work, the participants in this program are exposed to various teaching activities in seven selected schools and are given pedagogic and scientific counseling by the program's lecturers, who themselves are required to excel and manifest active enthusiasm for the program. The students' activities at the selected schools expose them to pupils from a variety of backgrounds in the population and thus come into direct contact with the various faces of Israeli society and its problems, such as the Arab and Druze minorities, the various aspects of religious Jews and the dilemma of Israeli identity, leadership and government in the era of the media, and alternative teaching methods as a replacement for the existing system. Over and above their studies in the specific areas of expertise (60 hours), the students are required to devote another 40 hours during the year to activity in the community and on the campus, tutoring students with special needs, and work with new immigrants and students of the minorities as assistant teachers (Yogev & Michaeli, 2009).

It is the obligation and responsibility of the lecturers and mentors in the teacher training colleges to train a generation of excellent teachers who will be able to fight against apathy, mediocrity, ignorance, malice, violence and indifference spreading rapidly among the pupils at our schools. The shaping of the future generation and determining the character of the nation is in their hands.

#### Conclusion

Teaching is a complex and demanding profession and together with the satisfaction of carrying out a mission the teacher is faced with frustration and impotency because of the reality in which they struggle for recognition of their status within the community. Being an excellent teacher is even more challenging.

The teaching profession demands interaction with pupils from a variety of backgrounds, under challenging conditions, working within a multicultural

community. The majority of researchers are of the opinion that the quality of teaching cannot be ascertained only by such indicators as academic degrees, number of years of study, experience, examination grades, and academic or pedagogic abilities. Additional analytic tools are required to identify potential excellent teachers, as no satisfactory scientific basis exists and depend on historic, ideological and local traditional attitudes to education. The intellectual teacher must have the ability to express himself verbally and have a broad education which enables him to act as an agent of culture and universal knowledge. The teacher as professional has a broad educational knowledge and is well versed in the educational processes on the subject he teaches. The merited teacher is one who is caring, committed to his pupils, who considers their emotional and intellectual abilities and he himself has a commitment of mission. If we add to these qualities the ability to foster critical thinking and dialogue that enables everyone to be heard, we have a definition of the excellent teacher, the teacher we consider as being an educator, a social, cultural and political activist who has the power to make a valued impact on the future of his pupils. This is the vision of the Excellent Teachers Training Program. In order to enable us to train students to be teachers at such a level we, their mentors, must be of that level. We, the mentors, must believe in our ability to substantiate this vision. It is in our power to do so. Even though the distance between the desirable and existing situation is still great, this is the profile of the excellent teacher, which the training excellent teachers program at the Kibbutzim teachers college sees as its goal.

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