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**LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING: REFLECTIONS ON EFL  
TEACHER TRAINING IN ISRAEL IN 2018**

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*Abstract*

Issues relating to the scope and content of the educational qualifications necessary to become an effective teacher of children generate constant debate worldwide both in the profession and also in the political and social arena. This is especially true for high stake subjects such as EFL in Israel which is widely perceived to be a determining factor in the future career success of pupils and indeed critical to the economic future of the country as a whole. As such, research based reflection on the needs of EFL teacher trainees preparing to teach in the national system can help to identify strengths and weaknesses in the current teacher-training program. A review of this kind calls for the opinions and experiences of the teacher trainees themselves to be taken into account. To this end, fifty EFL alumni of education degrees were asked to reflect upon their degree of satisfaction with their choice of profession and the level of preparedness they felt they had achieved as a result of the training they were given. Results indicate two critical points in the process; the first relating to the amount and nature of the overlap of theory and practice and the second relating to the nature and quality of both practicum and internship experiences. This paper also indicates ways in which future programs might benefit from incorporating the information gleaned from research of this kind.

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## **1. Introduction**

Issues relating to the content and scope of educational qualifications have long generated debate not only within the teaching profession but also in both the political and public arena. Whilst wider debate is not of itself a bad thing, intervention or change that has not been based on a deeply considered, research-based reflection of the needs of trainee and novice teachers can lead to their poor preparation resulting in inadequate school performance and high levels of disillusionment with the profession. This article identifies the needs of students training as EFL teachers in elementary schools as perceived by the trainees themselves. To this end, some fifty alumni at various advanced stages of their teaching career contributed to this needs analysis in a mixed method study. The data collected documents their opinions relating to their experiences of teacher education and its impact on their preparedness for their intended career.

### **1.1. Language Teaching Programs**

Teaching is a complex and demanding profession that requires adequate preparation (Musset 2010) and long-life professional growth (Agudo, 2017). To this end quality teacher-training is critical and should equip future teachers with the professional competences to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (ibid). However, in reality, there are claims that some teacher education programs are “distant from the immediate needs of practitioners” (Grossman, 2008; p.12) and weak in certain respects particularly reflecting a lack of connection between theory to practice (Agudo, 2017).

### **1.2. English Language Teaching and Teacher Education in Israel**

The Ministry of Education emphasizes the importance of English and recognizes the changing status of the language from that of a foreign language to that of a tool for international communication, which is necessary for the success of all pupils. To this end, it strives for the highest achievable standards of excellence in teaching English and prioritizes the qualification of well-trained teachers (Israel Ministry of Education, 2018). Professional standards for English teachers’ knowledge and performance require programs to teach courses including the teaching and the practice of learning, learning an additional language, catering to individual diversity, classroom interaction, the planning and preparation of teaching materials, assessment tools and a knowledge of English literature and culture (Israel Ministry of Education, 2004). One defining feature of the Israeli teacher-training program is "Staj" the year in which students teach in schools for a salary but are required to attend regular meetings at an education college in order to be certified with qualified teacher status.

### **1.3. Choosing Teaching as Profession**

The search for the factors determining the efficiency of training has been extensive. Evidence suggests that affective factors are pivotal in the success of teacher education influencing the whole range of teaching experiences from the basic decision to enter the profession to the level of satisfaction with its choice at later stages. In addition to personal preference, various sociocultural or economic factors influence a person’s decision to choose teaching. For example, the decision to enter the profession can be influenced by the way in which teaching can fit with other roles in life (Agudo, 2017). It is also chosen as

the result of the belief that it can be a good springboard for young people's development (Afrianto, 2014) or because of the perception that teaching is a respectable, culturally acceptable profession (Ben Horine, 2015).

Rahmani and Abadi (2014) found that a high level of dissatisfaction with teacher training courses correlated to students who had chosen the profession for the sake of more extrinsic motivation. This is supported by Sottile, Williams, McKee, and Damron (2005), whose investigation into the impact of teacher-training on student motivation and success found that high levels of satisfaction were reported in cases when the affective rewards associated with the profession were considered more significant than the financial benefits available.

The importance of a positive affective environment on the course itself is a topic largely overlooked in discussions of teacher training programs. However, affective issues appear to underlie many of the issues in the transition from training to professionalism. Much of what a teacher needs to know is invisible to the eye of observers. This includes developing the emotional adaptability and resilience to undergo the learning period of their initial professional experiences during which their initial beliefs (formed by their own primary experiences of education) are susceptible to change (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Donitsa-Schmidt & Weinberger, 2014; Kourkouli, 2015).

#### **1.4. Theory and practice; coherence and integration**

A common theme in the examination of the success of teacher training programs is the extent to which integration and coherence occurs between course and clinical work (Darling-Hammond 2006). There are several aspects to this; the integration and coherence between various academic courses, and between practicum with theory.

Practicum is generally agreed to be of critical importance in successful teacher education programs. Several aspects of teaching practice have been rated as particularly significant in terms of their overall contribution to the efficacy of the experience. These include its timing, its length and its "connectedness"- the extent to which it functions as a bridge between theory and practice. Many studies indicate that the teaching practice component does not imitate the real world of teaching and that to maximize its potential to its fullest it must accompany academic learning constantly throughout the entire period (Karvonen, 2013). This ties in logically with findings that experiential learning is also critical for adults and that their learning is cyclical and benefits hugely from the theory-practice balance that a strong connectedness between college and field practitioners can offer (Kourkouli, 2015).

Finally, to be considered is the role of the internship year and the nature of professional development courses for newly qualified teachers which can help facilitate life-long professional reflection enabling teachers to continually address and improve practice issues and contribute to the community of practitioners (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

## **2. Problem Statement**

EFL in Israel is a high stake subject on the school curriculum that is widely perceived to be a determining factor in the future career success of pupils. As such, it is at the forefront of the ongoing

debate regarding the needs of EFL teacher trainees preparing to teach in the national system and the weaknesses and strengths of current training programs warrant examination

### **3. Research Questions**

The research addressed the following research questions:

- What factors influence trainees' decision to become EFL teachers?
- What are alumni's perspectives regarding their training process'?
- What are alumni's perspectives regarding their beginning year of teaching

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The research examined alumni's perceptions regarding their training process starting from their decision to become EFL teachers through their training program ending with their induction, done with the aim of developing insights regarding the training program, and adjusting current training practices accordingly.

### **5. Research Methods**

A mixed method research design was employed to facilitate a better understanding of the phenomena examined. The combination of both qualitative and quantitative research and the eclectic approach taken by the research enabled an expanded understanding of, and insights into, the research problem (Creswell, 2014).

#### **5.1. Research population.**

The research population was comprised of 51 respondents (Jewish and Arab) in the northern area of Israel. The majority of the respondents were Jewish women in the 26-35 year old age group who were in their final stages of the same teachers' training program or employed in their first years of teaching.

#### **5.2. Research tools**

Data was gathered by using qualitative research tools as well as quantitative. Research was conducted in two phases. First, interviews were conducted with ten alumni regarding their perspectives of their training process from their decision to become English teachers to the beginning years of teaching. Based on a content analysis of the data collected a questionnaire was devised to examine alumni's satisfaction with current training practices. Forty-one completed questionnaires were analysed statistically.

### **6. Findings**

This section presents the findings relating to factors influencing the decision to become EFL teachers, alumni's perceptions regarding their training process and their perceptions regarding their beginning year of teaching.

### 6.1. Factors influencing the decision to become EFL teachers

Content analysis of data emerging from interviews of veteran alumni revealed that the factors influencing the decision to become EFL teachers are related to three aspects – emotional, practical and social (Figure 1). Research findings show that teachers mainly chose the profession due to emotional factors claiming they had "dreamed of being a teacher" that it "suited them" and that they wanted a "meaningful profession". Other factors mentioned were practical and social factors: "it's a convenient job", "the college made an attractive offer" and "my principal asked me to do it".

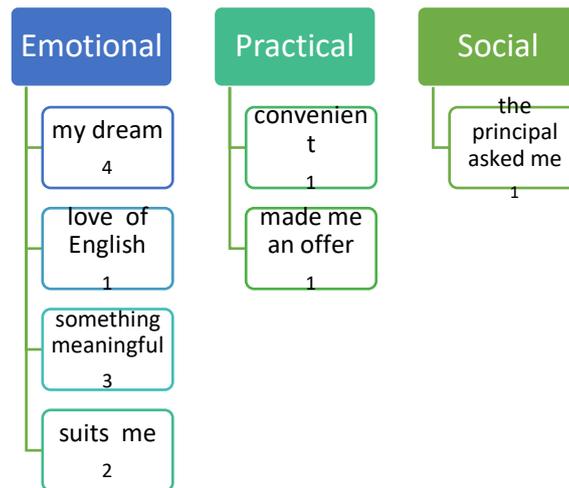


Figure 01. Factors influencing alumni's decision to become EFL teachers

Quantitative data was obtained regarding those factors which had influenced the decision to become EFL teachers (Figure 2) revealing that a large percentage of respondents indicated that their love of or abilities in the English language had led to their choice of profession. Liking children also ranked highly as an explanation.

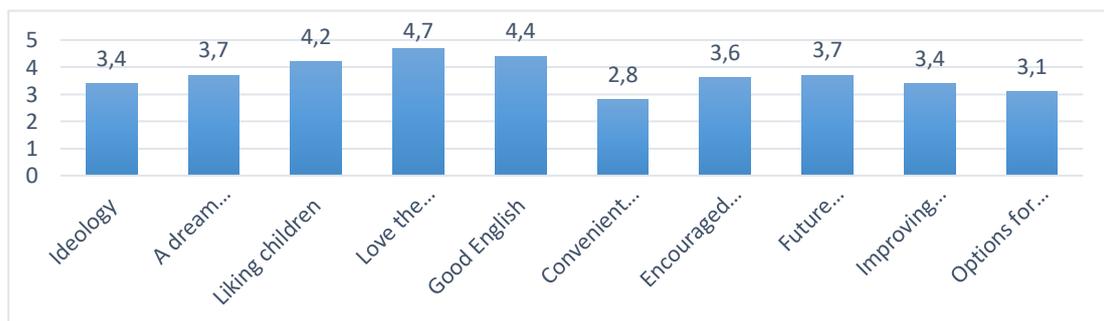


Figure 02. Factors influencing alumni's decision to become EFL teachers

### 6.2. Alumni's perceptions regarding their training process

This research also examined alumni's perceptions regarding the different aspects of the training process they had undergone. Figure 3 relates to such components of the program such as; general courses in education, English proficiency courses, theoretical and practical *disciplinary courses* (English), practicum and the internship (Staj) seminar.

Figure 3 reveals that when questioned about the general atmosphere on the course and the contribution of different components of the program, most of respondents positively evaluated their relationships with both the academic teaching staff and their peers on the course. They awarded high-level ratings to practically oriented courses such as; didactics, teaching songs and games, pedagogical grammar and using educational technology and relatively high ratings to those courses designed to strengthen their English language skills. By contrast, theoretical based courses, such as linguistics received the lowest rating although they scored higher than ratings of general education courses. Those general education courses (given in Hebrew) which were mentioned as valuable were preponderantly related to psychology but also remarked upon were the usefulness of courses related to classroom management and discipline, special education needs and creative teaching.

However, when asked which additional courses would have been useful a certain ambiguity can be detected. Although requests for additional courses relating to pedagogical issues such as assessment tools and dealing with differential learners were consistent with requests for more a practical bias in the program; a number of participants emphasized the need for courses that had not been amongst those they themselves had rated most useful when asked previously (namely the theoretical). Literature for example was frequently mentioned. The most common areas mentioned as needing more attention were not the practically oriented, but those relating to their own level of proficiency; speaking skills, essay writing and grammar courses. Additionally, respondents mentioned the need for more attention to issues as classroom management, communication skills, dealing with parents and teamwork. This is surprising as such courses are normally given as part of general education classes; a category that was poorly rated for relevance and usefulness in participant surveys.

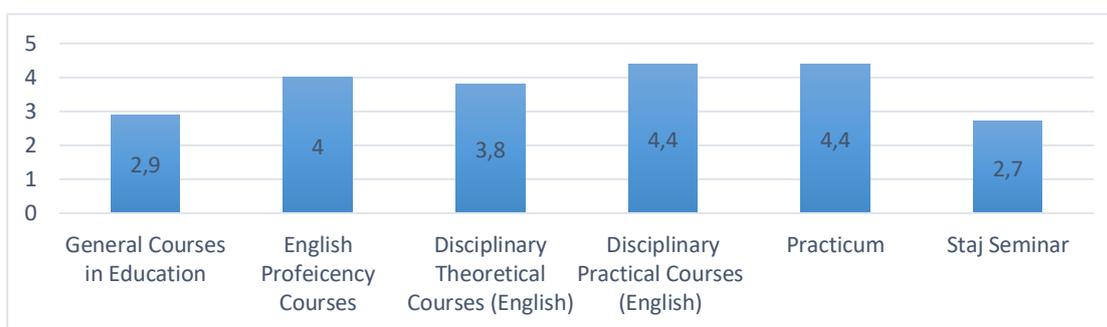
Whilst students rated their practicum as the most useful element of the course, nevertheless shortcomings were identified. It was felt that it would have been beneficial to have begun earlier and lasted longer: *"practicum should be more than one day"*, *"there needs to be more on going contact with the pupils"*, *"I started mine from my third year, it should have been from year one"*, and to have been conducted with more direct intervention by the college pedagogical staff in an effort to bridge the gap between the college lectures and school reality: *"There weren't enough hours or follow up by pedagogical advisers, there is a need to prepare students for the real job"*, *"Practicum is undertaken under the protective wing of the pedagogical adviser, the minute I started to work independently as a teacher the difficulty began"*.

In this context, alumni related to the significant role of master teachers in qualifying trainees specifically relating to the importance of a good role model during their practicum: *"the kind of teacher you are placed with is a very significant factor...the quality of teacher, his knowledge, his willingness, etc."*, *"I was exposed to a very good teacher she actually made the connection between theory and practice in a very good way"*, *"the things I learnt from my master teacher are things that stayed with me – I still use them"*.

Their comments revealed a need for emotional support during this period: *"It would be good to have someone take an interest, to ask how I am getting on"*. This was confirmed by the quantitative data collected - over 73% of those questioned expressed a need for an extended support program provided by their pedagogical supervisors during their first year of teaching principally, but not only, in relation to

pedagogical and administrative issues; “Just someone to ask how I am could give a lot of emotional support”, “ I would like help understanding my rights my salary slip how to organize my time and correct practice”.

The Staj seminar which accompanied the year-long practicum rated lowly in terms of student satisfaction “It didn't really contribute anything”. The reasons for this in many cases related to the general nature of this workshop. About two thirds of the students questioned had not participated in a language teaching workshop but one of a general nature: “There was no connection whatsoever to teaching English” Students resented having to listen to problems not related to their personal experiences: “Sharing emotions and feelings is not enough” or frustration at the fact that no real solutions were provided: “What we learned in the workshop is not even close to what happens in the field”. By contrast, approval ratings of on-line Staj seminars offered by the college were significantly more positive although criticisms were levelled at the size of the group involved.



**Figure 03.** Alumni’s perceptions regarding the contribution of different components of the training program

### 6.3 Alumni’s perceptions regarding their beginning year of teaching

The current research also examined alumni’s perspectives regarding their beginning years of teaching. Research revealed that overall, respondents at or near the end of their education indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the choice they had made, noting in particular their pleasure at the children’s progress, their interaction with them and their enjoyment of teaching the subject matter itself with comments such as; “You feel you have done something”, “I like the children’s curiosity and their mistakes”, “Being a teacher is great... I have fulfilled a dream”.

When reporting about the difficulties of their induction, many problems addressed related to their inexperience rather than deficiencies in teacher education: The most common complaint was the huge preparation time necessary due to the need to be creative and interesting and the difficulties of balancing work and other obligations. Additionally, the difficulty of dealing with the demands of the Ministry of Education in terms of performance rates in nationally standardized exams was prominent amongst issues raised together with how to manage parent-teacher relations, grappling with discipline problems and dealing with the motivational issues of learners. Also of concern to some respondents were difficulties integrating into school culture, being accepted by more experienced staff members in their schools and meeting expectations.

## **7. Conclusion**

This article depicts alumni's perceptions regarding the training process they underwent focusing on factors influencing their decision to become EFL teachers and their satisfaction with their training and induction process.

### **7.1. The decision to become an English teacher**

The evidence gleaned displayed that the decision to become an EFL teacher was mainly related to personal choice, life experience, altruism and moral values all of which can be considered "emotional" choices as opposed to more pragmatic motivations. Since choosing this profession out of intrinsic affective reasons result in high level of satisfaction (Sottile, Williams, McKee, & Damron, 2005) this could explain the high levels of alumni satisfaction with their choice of profession. The high level of satisfaction with the program also lends weight to claims for the importance of paying attention to affective aspects of any learning environment and learning process (Dolev & Leshem, 2016) and to specifically paying it due attention in the teacher education process (Schalock, Schalock, & Ayres, 2006).

### **7.2. The training process**

This research displays that despite the alumni's overall satisfaction with their training there was a clearly need expressed for more practical experience in schools as part of their program. This finding is supported by literature discussing the importance of the connection between theory and practice in the context of teacher training in developing quality teaching (Agudo, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Respondents also indicated that this increase needs to be accompanied by more hands-on support and mentoring both during formal training and after it has officially ended. This confirms the findings of other studies in this field.

The fact that in this study, students appear to want more training in tips and "ready to use" teaching techniques of the kind normally covered by the content of general education, indicates that teacher educators should make a more direct connection between theoretical courses and their application to classroom dilemmas and situations thus helping trainees attain information and skills that can be used in a functional and professional way.

### **7.3. The induction year**

Alumni in their induction year did not report lacking knowledge of teaching skills rather, they revealed a sense of professional isolation resulting from the reduction of peer group influence and support and the loss of the pedagogical advisor's involvement. Matters such as help in understanding salary slips, dealing with parents or discipline issues do not normally fall under the jurisdiction of the practical pedagogical courses they claimed they had lacked but would have been appropriate material for the Staj program. The fact that this program, was not highly rated by the students suggests a need to examine more closely the way such courses are planned and delivered

In conclusion, trainee teachers need to become confident in the development of their professionalism as a process in which the completion of initial teacher education is not an end goal, but a stepping stone. In the same way as teaching pupils is a dynamic and challenging process, so the ways in which we

educate our teachers cannot remain static, teaching our teachers better, is an enduring goal to be met by constant enquiry and the improvement that research can promote.

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