Multi-Dimensional Support Site for Students’ Teachers and Teacher Educators

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1. Introduction

The issue of supporting student teachers throughout the process of acquiring the profession is especially complicated. Like in all prophesies this occupation encompasses theoretical and practical facets. Both facets are interwoven, building the ability to make connection between them, to support and develop both, is essential for good practice (Tigchelaar & Kurthagen, 2005).

Constructivist theories of learning (Perkins, 1992; Carmon et al. 2006) emphasize the importance of the dialog in the process of acquiring and creating knowledge. These theories are influencing the task perception of teacher educators to a large extent leading them to re-think learning strategies used in the program (Harpaz, Y. & Lefstein, 2005). The need to foster the development of independent self-regulated learner is another concern in the case of the professional requirement to be a long life learner. Those two, as well as many other reasons, are emphasizing the need to offer various learning opportunities throughout the pre and in-service period.

Teacher Education usually takes place in two sites – institution (academy) and field (educational system). The two sites serve different aims, set different demands on students and teachers and require different kind of mediating, supervision or support (Tigchelaar & Korthagen, 2005).

Academic libraries are well established institutions, usually aimed at widening and supporting the acquisition of basic theoretical knowledge. Learning centers aimed mainly at processing, mediating and supporting the accumulated knowledge via personal mentoring, are relatively young conventions and are still looking for the right paths to go. In most cases they reflect local initiatives and lack a distinguished theoretical body of knowledge to guide their actions.

The terms "Learning Centers" or "Resources Center" represents different kinds of institutions, aims, target audiences, support strategies and the like in the academic world and outside it (Haifa University, 2006; Hativa, 2002). In this paper we shall refer to a Learning Center located in an Initial Teacher Training College within the area of the College Library. The Center contains sub-centers each concentrating on specific domain/age-group in teacher education and the teaching profession.

The main aim of the Center is to offer support in the way of strengthening the connections between theory and practice, and to support student teachers in preparing themselves to cope with the class reality. The Center is attached to the library so that student teachers can move smoothly from one to the other, from theory to practice and visa versa. The place offers first and foremost informal learning and mentoring aimed at supporting the formal curricula.

Another aim of the center is to serve as a "professional home" for teacher educators, to help improve their teaching and to better acquaints them with the curricula being taught in the educational systems. The Center's uniqueness is the fact that unlike other learning situations it offers support without connecting it with any assessment process.

The core essence of teaching professions is the dialogue, the discourse being carried out by partners at all levels and contexts. The very informal nature of the Center, the open space it
offers and the fact that it serves many different audiences, invites personal and professional encounters and is likely to raise a significant contribution to the educational dialogue.

The paper is written in a descriptive manner. It draws a process rather than reports a research. As the Center was just recently inaugurated and the students are on summer vacation, it will relate to the planned hypothesizes and will lack the long term scrutinizing of the implementation phase.

The literature review will include brief reference to the issue of change in Higher Education Institution as a basis for viewing the whole process, to the nature of teacher education programs with regard to the question of connections between theory and practice and formal as well as informal ways to support it, to the issue of self-regulated learning as a mean for professional development and to the questions of mentoring styles meant at promoting the achievement of these goals.

2. Literature review

Our literature review will include four aspects of the subject issue as mentioned above: 1. leading change in Higher Education Institutions; 2. Teacher Education curriculum structure and the essential relations between the theoretical and the practical components; 3. Independent, self-regulated learning as leading goal of teacher education; and 4. Mentoring and mediating styles aimed at enhancing the development of these goals. These four aspects will provide a general view of the context of events and will lay the foundations for reasoning the need of Learning Center beside and in addition to the traditional library and the formal curricula.

2.1. Leading change in Higher Education Institutions

Middlehurst & Elton (1993) argue that Higher Education Institutions operate within a model of 'checks and balances', a kind of "spontaneous corrective action" (ibid. p. 254) occurring within a community of highly educated and committed members. Bush (1995) expands on that and writes that the 'ambiguity model' is characteristic to Higher Education Institutions for better and for worse.

Researchers agree that both for external and internal changes influencing the Higher Education Institutions, a more systematic and professional attitude has to be taken. In state of ambiguity or 'spontaneous corrective actions' changes tend to happen rather than being foreseen, planned or lead. In many cases they are initiated by individuals or subgroups in the organization and later adopted as preferred policy (Serlin et.al.2006). Writers note that making changes happen depends to a large extent on the ability to create consensus around ideas (Middlehurst & Elton, 1993). Participants who are likely to be part of the process should be convinced that the change is necessary and that it has the potential to promote individuals and the duty they are committed to.

Teacher education programs tend to be highly fragmented due to the differentiation among the various components of the program and to the different staff members in charge. That, together with the difficulty to integrate the diverse basis of the profession, set a complex challenge to student teachers and teacher educators alike and calls for intentional actions. We shall expand on that complexity in the next paragraph.
2.2. The nature of Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs are usually based on wide theoretical and practical bodies of knowledge. There is a wide agreement among researchers that the programs quality depends to a large extent on the ability and flexibility of student teachers and their educators to move back and forth within the two and to make good use of it for better performing and theorizing. (Feiman-Nemser, 1987; 2000; Hoban, 2000; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Tigchelaar & Korthagen, 2005).

Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) post a very important question at the end of their research. They ask: "Can Teacher Education Make a Difference?" They claim that according to their findings the answer might be positive only under certain circumstances:

"... To achieve a learning environment that constantly influences prospective teachers' learning, close co-operation between university-based and school-based teacher educators is a necessary condition. Moreover, integrating practice and theory and encouraging personal learning require from teacher educators specific expertise in the field of mentoring and supervision" (ibid. p. 214).

The authors impart central role to the aspect of mediating and mentoring and argue that teacher education can make a difference only if personal guidance is available for student teachers along the process of becoming professionals.

Korthagen and Kessels (1999) and Korthagen and Tigchelaar (2005) offer models of combining the acquisition of theory and practice in a manner that will be beneficial for both. They call the model they offer a "realistic approach" claiming that "the more important question" is how to make the integration between theory and practice which is "fundamental to the effectiveness of teacher education" (Korthagen and Kessels 1999, p. 4). Their approach emphasizes the importance of analysis of personal cases drawing on the students own experience and being systematically discussed and connected to existing theories as well as to emerging (grounded) ones (ibid. 1999).

Hoban (2004) widens the responsibility lying on the program designers and looks at it with a more comprehensive glance. He claims that "if teaching is a complex profession, than a more integrated and dynamic approach... is needed" (ibid. p 117). He offers "a four-dimensional approach" (p. 117), aimed at strengthening the links among all the participants in teacher education programs. He mentions four necessary connections:

1. Connections among university based teachers;
2. Connections between university based teachers and schools;
3. Connections between students and their peers and
4. Personal links within the individual teacher educator.

(ibid. 2004).

All four mutual relations suggested above seem essential but do not always exist. Hoban's call comes to help achieve a more holistic view of the mission and to pay more attention to the fragmentation characterizing teacher education programs in our days (Golan, 2003).

Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) divert attention to the need of developing differentiations in the way of relating to different kinds of knowledge, emphasizing the importance of using various teaching and mentoring styles in each of the learning sites. They stress that "teacher education is not only a question of curriculum development but also one of staff development"
They claim that as the program takes place in different sites and different teaching/learning strategies are being used, it needs to be supervised in various styles. These styles should derive from the uniqueness of each environment as well as from the student's professional stage and the different roles they have to cope with. In all cases and contexts the main purpose of the support is to help the student teacher gain autonomy and independence in their learning and performances and to assist them to better reason the considerations underlying it.

In the two next sub-sections we shall relate to these two subjects: self-regulation learning and mentoring styles aimed at promoting its formation.

2.3 Independent, self-regulated learning.

The ever changing nature of the modern world strongly calls for the need to develop skills for independent learning. These skills are especially important for teachers who are required to adopt an attitude of life-long-learning as an inherent and essential part of their prophesy.

Over the past 20 years definitions of "self directed learning" (SDL) and "self regulated learning" (SRL) are being widely used. These definitions include meta-cognitive, motivation and behavioral characteristic, which reflects the active participation of the student in the learning process. The SDL and SRL often are associated with adult learning and teachers learning.

The SDL is associated with setting goals, selecting resources and managing time. Self directed learners strive to reflect, assess and evaluate information rather than uncritically accept it (Van Eekelen et al, 2005).

SRL is an "active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment" (Pintrich, 2000). Pintrich argues that self regulated activities mediate the relations between the learners and their environments and influence the learners' achievements. He provides a model of four phases of self regulation. In each phase there are four possible areas for self regulation. The phases include:

1. Fore thinking, planning, activating.
2. Monitoring;
3. Controlling;
4. Reacting and reflecting.

The areas contained in each phase are: cognition, motivation, behavior and context (Schunk, 2005).

According to Zimmerman (2000; 2002) "self regulation refers to self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals". He presents a model of 8 skills which are important to the student's self-regulation processes:

1. Setting goals;
2. Adapting powerful strategies for attaining these goals;
3. Monitoring one's performance;
4. Restructuring the learning environment to make it compatible with the goals;
5. Managing time effectively;
6. Self evaluating the preferred methods;
7. Attributing result to causation;
(Van Eekelen, 2005).

Oosterheert and Vermunt (2001) found that only a minority of the student teachers appeared to be fully self-regulated learners. These findings point to the need of intentional actions aimed at changing the picture and foster the development of self awareness of student teachers to their competencies and needs. Student teachers have to take active part in processes of planning various learning situations, choosing appropriate learning strategies, reflecting and assessing performance of pupils and of themselves. Such a process should be well planned, carefully led and appropriately guided. The mentoring styles suitable to promote the development of those competencies will be discussed in our next paragraph.

2.3. Mentoring styles.

As indicated in the previous section, fostering the competence of self regulatory learning is one of the central goals of teacher education. The encounters occurring within the learning environment are most influential in that process. The term "learning environment" relates to an entity including physical as well as human factors on which the student teacher act. The various mentors have central role in this course of action.

There are few definitions to the concept of "mentoring". The term is usually defined as guide, role model, counselor, coach or sponsor (Koochan & Trimble, 2000). Some educators define mentoring as "close, intense, mutually beneficial relationship between someone who is older, wiser, more experienced and more powerful with someone younger or less experienced" (Bullouge & Draper, 2004, pp 407). Others emphasize mentoring as a "method for transferring theoretical and practical knowledge to trainees or beginning teachers" (Vonk, 1996 pp 8).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) see mentoring as a way of preparing teachers to become effective change agents who are committed to the making of difference in the life of young people and are skilled at the pedagogical and partnership developments that make success with students possible. Mentoring in this sense becomes not just a way of supporting individual teachers, but also a device to help build strong professional cultures of teaching in the schools, dedicated to improve teaching, learning and caring.

Mentoring in teacher education is especially complicated due to the participating of four players; the student, the college supervisor, the school tutor and the mentor in the "Resources Center". The nature of the interactions among them depends on the extent of responsibility each one of them has (Vonk, 1996).

The literature suggests four main types of mentor–student interaction, ranging from non-directive to highly directive:

1. Directing – telling student teacher what, how and when to perform structured task The mentor acts as resource person. He analyzes the student's needs and identifies the
problems for which he subsequently provides a number of solutions (Vonk, 1996, Stahlhut & Hawkes, 2000);

2. Coaching – demonstrating, modeling, developing talent and resolving conflicts considerately;

3. Supporting – maintaining harmony, praising and emphasizing consideration;

4. Delegating – allowing freedom to experiment, tolerating uncertainty and facilitating. This style is based on the assumption that the student concerned knows best what he has to do and that he has the ability to think and act on his own (Vonk, 1996, Stahlhut & Hawkes, 2000).

Richenberg & openhaimer, (2005) and others argue that the complex role of the mentor consists knowledge and a set of skills that have to be learned:

1. Knowledge of teaching (Sulman, 1986).

2. Knowledge of educating teachers (Feinman-Nemser, 2001)


4. Personal-Biographical knowledge (Clandinin & Connely, 2000).

Carroll (2001), following Feiman-Nemser, argues that those who implement the practice of educative mentoring do the following:

1. Think about mentoring as a form of teaching and take on an educative role.

2. Attend to how the students think and what they believe and to their way of making sense of experience.

3. Focus novice's attention on pupils' thinking and sense making.

4. Have a vision of good teaching.

5. Have a theory of learning to teach and a repertoire of mentoring moves.

The literature reviewed for this paper clearly points to the need to develop mentoring skills throughout the on going process of becoming a teacher educator, and not to leave it to accumulated experience or good educative senses. In our own case the fact that the traditional trio of student teacher, school- based and college-based mentors was widened to a quartet, oblige intentional collaboration together with the sharpening of the uniqueness of each.

**Contextual background.**

The traditional and most recognized resource supporting academic studies is the library. Even though the way of storing, presenting and using its materials, is constantly changing with the advancing technology, the main concept of learning within it remains more or less the same. The materials are selected according to the areas studied in each institution; they stand for themselves and they serve as sources for broadening the various knowledge bases.

Learning Centers and Resource Centers seem to have a much younger history and to enfold a wide variety of purposes, locations, policies, materials and the like. They are usually a result of local/personal initiative and are focused in specific domain and target audience.

The various learning centers in "Oranim" Teacher College were developed along the last 25 years independent of each other. Some were built due to emerging needs of students, school teachers or faculty, some followed external policy (Ministry of Education) and some were the outcome of personal initiatives. About 10 years ago those centers gained official recognition
by the Ministry of Education and as part of encouraging the establishment of regional center for staff development. The services given within the centers and the materials developed were mostly school system oriented.

Four main reasons, strongly connected with each other, have changed that picture and caused us to divert the focus of action to student's teachers and teacher educators, rather than mainly school teachers:

1. The Ministry of Education canceled its support therefore we were no longer obliged to adhere to their instructions.
2. Student teachers attending the college in our days need a lot of support;
3. Due to deep budged cuts the curriculum was drastically cut down and students are now required to learn a lot more on their own;
4. Due to the process of academic recognition of Teacher Colleges in Israel resulting in the pre-condition of higher academic degrees for faculty members, many new faculty members join the teaching staff while not having any previous teaching experience.

All those reasons required a comprehensive rethinking of the supervision and the support imparted to student teacher and teacher educators. A steering committee, representing all the Faculties on campus was established to lead the change.

The aims of the change.

The new site was planned to foster collaboration among student teachers, teacher educators, librarians and Center mentors. The separate neighboring functions – library and Learning Center - both strive to support the student's teacher make the best use of the various resources in the way of becoming an enlighten and self-regulated learner who can better integrate the theoretical and practical basics of the profession.

The specific aims defined by the steering committee were the following:

1. Strengthen connections among support resources on campus;
2. Supply individual mentoring in fulfilling theoretical and practical tasks;
3. Support the preparation for field experience;
4. Offer a model of support free of assessment;
5. Offer models for content development and visual designs;
6. Meet staff needs;
7. Create a "home" for professional dialogue and professional development.

Those challenges had to be responded to by a well planned action plan. The implementation took two years and involved academic and administrative position holders.

Sequence of action.
Several steps and various considerations had to be taken in order to achieve the above mentioned aims. The preparation process required both attitude changes and practical actions, which included the following:

1. Establishing a steering committee which involved academic and administrative position holders. The committee's was to crystallize the academic rational of the Center, to translate it to financial requirements and to obtain approval of the relevant committees in the campus.

2. Planning the site according to the academic rational - the rational for centralizing the various resources in one area was that the proximity should enable student teachers, faculty members and counselors to make the best use of each source and help strengthen the bond between theory and practice. It was also planned to bring together faculty members who teach different components of the program and to foster the dialogue among them. The center includes classes and counseling rooms in different sizes meant to serve seminars, didactic lessons and personal counseling and to encourage faculty to use the offered facilities and materials. Interior design and space allocation for the various domains and services within the complex had to be carefully considered. The design had to enable good control over the whole place in order to best use the limited number of staff members, to expose the resources to users in a stimulating manner and to enable different sizes of groups to operate within it. Materials like school curricula, teaching plans and teaching and learning accessories (video cassettes music cassettes, pictures and the like), are presented on open shelves and accessible for all users near the traditional library. Examples of visual designs of contents are also presented in order to stimulate student teachers' thought and practice.

3. Designing the managerial environment – management issues were discussed with regard to the extent of collaboration and autonomy of the Library and the Center, to connections between the two, to the joint and the separated services and to the different mentoring strategies. Task demands for the academic head and staff members were defined and position holder was nominated.

4. Working with multi-centers staff to create a team - Team building was one of the more complicated tasks. Supervisors in the separated centers were used to work in a rather autonomic manner, namely enacting different styles and developing different strategies of mentoring, preparing, presenting and storing materials and the like. Each center operated separately in a unique way, deriving from the preferences and the background of its staff members. Long and well planned process had to be taken in order to turn the split groups into united team. The process contained mutual team learning meant at studying the existing materials at each center. Special attention was given to define and design a repertoire of appropriate mentoring styles

5. Moving in - The classification of the materials was another issue to discuss. Staff members, who had put a lot of effort in collecting, classifying and disseminating the materials they developed, found it difficult to unify, depart or throw away beloved properties. Classification criteria were negotiated and decided upon to help conduct this action.

6. Exercise new working culture and pattern – the center was just recently opened. The Head of the Center and the team members used the summer vacation to learn the new organization and to formulate working pattern appropriate to its tasks. The absence of student, however, delayed part of this task for future time.
7. Initiate contact with unit heads – the Center Head used the summer break to meet the academic unit heads, to establish working relations with them and to learn their various needs. At present it seems that the most inviting Center is evoking hidden needs and attracts faculty to use its facilities more than we thought of.

From a personal point of view, it was great privilege to witness the birth of the new Center. So far we feel that we just touch the tip of the iceberg. A lot still lies ahead to study and to be done but we have the feeling that the place is likely to make a significant contribution to student teachers, teachers and teacher educators' development and dialogue.

6. Future plans

At this point we can rely merely on our past and present experience and describe our future dreams. Hoping to realize them in the future. In the past the various Centers were in great demand. At present the Center attracts mainly student teachers. Our further plans are to turn the site into a Center for faculty professional development and initiation. We strive to enable the conduct of peer studies in issues like adult learning, didactic matters, teaching strategies and the like. We also intend to open "master classes" create a platform for presentation of new ideas, researches and papers.

Several issues and questions are still to be studied and discussed;

1. Making time for independent learning in a reality of hard working students;
2. Highlighting the differences and the communalities between the Library and the Learning Center;
3. Developing wide repertoire of mentoring styles and finding the balance between support and dependency;
4. Deciding on criteria for developing of new directions;
5. designing criteria for staff recruitment;
6. Financing the center in turbulent times

In general we would like the place to help improve teaching and learning among verity of audiences; student teachers, faculty members, field trainers, school teachers and communities who want to be involved in education and teacher education.

7. Concluding remarks

The new Center was planned with a holistic view of teacher education. It has the potential to promote collaborations of many kinds among many partners taking part in the mission of preparing the future teachers. We began our joint journey within our own home and we hope to widen it and stretch our arms further out. A lot of work is still ahead of us but we feel that the direction we are starting to walk on can make a significant contribution to bring the pieces of the puzzle and the various player of the game closer together and to foster the professional dialogue among them.

Many questions not yet examined are still open in our mind and should be subject for further research such as; the need and the role of Learning Centers in teacher education; the qualifications of staff members within that kind of institutions; the nature of mentoring; the range of services needed to be supplied; the part of advanced technology versus, or side by
side with human interaction, in such centers; the image of such an institution in an academic surrounding and the probability of attracting faculty members to take part in that action.

Our Center developed partly in a rolling, evolution-like style, and partly due to good use of local circumstances and well reasoned needs of student teachers and teacher education. It was not free of objections and obstacles within the College deriving from competition on resources as well as differences point of view of the educational process. We believe that Centers for study and personal counseling should gain wider attention and recognition as important institutions supporting the process of becoming and being a professional in education. Satisfactory results of a survey, recently conducted in our own college, strongly supports this assumption.

References


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