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Research Activity and Research Culture in Academic Teachers' Colleges in Israel

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the importance of research activity in academic teachers' colleges in Israel and analyses how this activity is organised. It investigates the contribution of research to development of professional staff and the state of research activities at teacher training colleges. Major obstacles impeding research at the colleges are pointed out and conditions affecting research performance are indicated. The character of the actual research activity is analysed and five different models are specified. The paper focuses on the research committees and research units, which are the central organisational tools for research development, by analysing and describing the range of research culture in the colleges: from absent to optimal. The paper contributes a theoretical and an applied framework that may support the further development of research at the colleges.*

Introduction

This paper discusses the organisation, support and the importance of research activity in academic teachers' colleges, using Israel as a case study. The paper notes the factors that influence and limit the development of a research culture in the colleges, the aim being to stimulate a discussion that will promote research in the colleges.

This paper explores the teachers' training colleges in Israel that are separate from the universities, and that award a certificate to teach in kindergarten, elementary school and special education.

Until the 1980s the post-secondary education system in Israel was divided into two different branches, academic and non-academic. The academic branch consisted of the seven Israeli universities (focusing on research and teaching), and the non-academic branch consisted of other institutions, such as teachers' training seminars (focusing on teaching). During the last two decades the situation has changed radically. Most of the seminars have been upgraded to academic colleges. During the 1990s other post-secondary institutions were also upgraded to academic colleges (mainly regional). The current situation distinguishes colleges for the first degree only from universities, in which most of the research is carried out and

graduate degrees are awarded. Although the teachers' training colleges have been academically upgraded they still preserve some non-academic characteristics (such as pedagogical instruction). Dorman (2000) describes a similar process in Australia, where during the 1980s the post-secondary institutions were upgraded to become universities. The difference between these institutions lies chiefly in the level of research and scholarship, which is related to years of service and the level of academic culture.

Universities, including those in Israel (Chen *et al.*, 1996), tend to prefer research to instruction. The academic colleges in Israel have the opposite problem: they focus on teaching. If they are to be institutions of higher education worthy of the name, they need to promote research activity, which is perceived as an important part of teaching in higher education.

Accreditation by the Council for Higher Education as a full-fledged academic institution (one that is entitled to award academic degrees) is not enough. To survive and progress, and to do a good job of training qualified teachers, each college needs to maintain regular mechanisms and procedures that preserve its formal and substantive right to be the gatekeeper that lets its graduates through to the academic community and the teaching profession. One of the tools that permits this, perhaps the most important one today, is the fostering of research activity in the colleges.

Once the accreditation process is completed, the college is entitled to award the BEd academic degree. The accredited college's lecturers need to hold an MA degree (or equivalent) at least, and most of the newly recruited staff earn doctorates or the equivalent. The teaching load is reduced (to 16 hours per week), which releases additional state funds for lectureships and admission standards for students are raised.

At present the accreditation process is manifest in the new criteria for the advancement of faculty members in academic teachers' colleges: scholarly publications are a major criterion for promotion to the highest ranks.

The Contribution of Research

Development of an Up-to-date, Advanced Staff

Engaging in research means being a partner in the creation of knowledge. Research activity requires absorption of the latest scholarly literature, empirical examination of educational work, critical analysis of the literature and educational work, and submission of the research outcomes for review by colleagues through presentation and publication for the academic community. All the foregoing quite clearly help to sustain college teachers on the appropriate academic level.

According to Kfir *et al.* (1997), 68% of college teachers report being engaged in research. For the most part, this activity is toward master's degrees and doctorates, or concerns a second job, but has nothing to do with the teacher's work at the college, or apparently to his or her employment as a trainer of teachers.

Exposure to the Rules of Rational-empirical Work

According to Doyle (1990), exposure to research, investigation and assessment plays a role in forming the qualified teacher. The research process develops the students' intellect mechanisms of internal criticism, and professional autonomy (Doyle, 1990). Professional decision-making based on empirical examination and rational analysis should be part of the model of routine educational work that the college presents to its education students. Consequently, they gain from being exposed to it in the course of their studies (Shamai & Gafni, 1997).

A Dynamic Improving Institution

The college culture that we have in mind is one that calls for change in an effort to progress and improve, and that examines itself constantly to see whether it is achieving its aims. Evaluation ought to become an integral part of the work routine: evaluation of the present situation and of change, of goals and of programmes, of performance and products.

A teachers' college may demonstrate its determination to improve itself by taking a scholarly approach: making itself and its programmes available for ongoing evaluation by an autonomous professional body and seeking examination of and feedback on every new initiative and every established routine. Scholarly (rational, objective, independent) mechanisms of internal evaluation ensure alertness, and an effort to amend and improve things.

Contribution to Scholarly and Professional Knowledge

A survey of the professional literature on teaching and teacher training shows it to be deficient in some matters deemed to be of direct benefit for actual teaching. The gap between educational research and educational practice must be bridged, as those engaged in educational research at the universities are not responsible for training teachers, and those who train teachers do not engage in research (Ciscell, 1993; Ducharme, 1993). According to the Holmes Group (1995) the academic staff of teacher training colleges should be both teachers and researchers.

College teachers can overcome the alienation that exists between academic educational research and educational practice by investigating what they are teaching, and linking their teaching with scholarly research. Such a link may draw academics working on teacher training closer to educational practice and make their research more relevant to the system. Such a link may also familiarise the teachers in the system with scholarly research so that they use it and its findings more frequently.

Sources of Information on Research Activity

We used several sources of information to investigate what the colleges are doing. All the data refer to teacher training colleges affiliated with the Israeli Ministry of Education, which it was our mandate to probe: secular (Jewish and Arab) and religious Jewish.

The data are based on 'official' documents, views and formal meetings, which have critically reviewed by us.

Visits and Meetings

We visited 12 colleges, nine of them academic colleges and discussed the issue with officials at additional meetings. Our acquaintance with additional colleges, where we currently worked or have worked in the past has given us better than reasonable familiarity with the research activity in 16 of the 18 academic colleges and four of the seven colleges seek academic accreditation. We used this qualitative material extensively throughout the study reported here.

Survey of Research Activity in the Colleges

We distributed a questionnaire to the college directors and the people in charge of research activity at the colleges. As part of the survey, questionnaires were sent in 1997–99 to all the academic colleges and to colleges in the process of obtaining accreditation.

Summary of the Data from Documents

We analysed the following documents:

1. Documents submitted for a seminar on the teacher education colleges in Israel, December 1997;
2. The *Book of Abstracts* from the Third International Conference on Teacher Training, June 1999;
3. Abstracts of studies conducted with support from the Intercollegiate Research Committee of the National Research and Development Institute of the teacher education colleges ('MOFET'), 1989/90–1998/99.

The analysis of results follows several main themes. These are:

- the obstacles impeding research and the conditions for the development of research in the colleges;
- the way research is conducted at the college;
- the functions of research committees and units;
- an overview of the research activity and research culture that emerge from all of these factors.

The Obstacles Before Research and the Conditions for its Development

Main Obstacles

The 'college culture' in the teachers' colleges is primarily one of teaching. To improve the colleges' academic work, broaden what they offer students (fields of

study and degrees), and enhance their ability to recruit good students, the college culture would do well to include a 'research culture'. For this to occur, several obstacles need to be overcome.

Budgetary difficulties. By a decision from the Israeli Council for Higher Education, the colleges of education are defined exclusively as teaching institutions and have no research budgets. To encourage more people to engage in research systematically and comprehensively, a budget has to be obtained and made available to the teachers, and some teaching hours should be converted into research hours. However, it is hard for the colleges to obtain these hours from internal sources, which are intended for teaching only. Researchers at the colleges even face enormous difficulty raising funds from external sources, since many funding bodies deal only with universities and are unwilling to accept applications from colleges.

Lack of expertise. There is a shortage of expert researchers who could assume responsibility for research studies and design, and could establish a research culture in the colleges. Although the process of becoming more academic, like the new promotion criteria, encourages teachers to engage in research, the budgetary constraints and other factors hamper the recruitment of researchers, and retraining of teachers and teacher-researchers. There is a need to invest in finding ways to use the existing researchers efficiently and to increase the number of active researchers.

Organisational imponderables. How should the research activity in the colleges be organised, given the first two obstacles? In each college the activity has developed differently, if it has developed at all, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less, even when the budgets and expertise are similar. This is discussed in detail below.

Preconditions for Conducting Research

This paper focuses mainly on our findings about the structure and organisation of research activity in the colleges. The three obstacles mentioned above are related to intervening factors and additional background factors. The following factors interact in a complex manner with those obstacles; sometimes they result from them and sometimes they influence them.

Long-term planning for the college. The college should have a long-term vision of the system's development in future years. Most colleges engage in medium- and long-term planning. To devote human and organisational resources to the development of research, the college has to free itself, at least to some extent, from day-to-day, short-term struggles for existence. Colleges struggling for survival have difficulty doing this.

Administrative initiative for the introduction of research. The administration's attitude toward research is a significant factor. Some directors regard research as a stimulus for the development of the college and perceive the research culture as a vital part of the college culture. Some directors fund research, but do not see it as a substantial tool for the college's advancement; instead, they use it more as a public relations device to glorify the college's reputation. In some colleges the administration takes no initiative to promote research activity and does not make the necessary resources available despite the presence of personnel who are interested in doing research.

The stage in the academization process. As expected, there is a large gap between the academic and the not-yet-academic colleges in terms of the scope and quality of research and, among the academic colleges, between those that obtained accreditation at different times. This disparity creates a vicious circle: it is both a result of the situation and a factor in the perpetuation of the situation. Progress on the academization track is related to the development of research.

Differences between streams. As a rule, the secular state colleges, which regard scholarly research as one of their basic values, have promoted research more than the religious state colleges, whose outlook stresses the authority of the Torah. In the latter, research is focused more on religious issues and less on empirical studies in general and quantitative research in particular. In recent years the gap has narrowed because much of the research in state colleges now applies qualitative research methods and because the religious state colleges also tend to conduct qualitative research.

College size. The large colleges, with their bigger staffs and larger budgets, have an advantage. They are more likely to have staff members who pursue research, and they have greater budgetary flexibility when they want to take advantage of it for the sake of research. Large colleges also have more tracks, centers, and units, which makes the formation of research units or research groups possible.

Personal stature of the principal researcher and stature of the research unit/committee. The stature of the heads of the research units and research committees affects the stature of the committee/unit. When the principal researcher is highly respected by the administration and staff, the value of research is more likely to increase and a research culture is more likely to become part of the college culture. Several colleges employ outside consultants, usually from a university, to be in charge of their research activity. The advantage is that the consultant has prestige and research experience, but the drawback is that this work is in addition to a full-time job at the university. Employing an outside consultant is not necessarily in the best interests of research activity in the college itself.

The definition of research. The definition of research is broad. There are two extreme approaches: one defines the activity as aiming to uncover and understand the general

rules by which the world functions and to increase the body of existing scholarly knowledge (Levin-Rosalis, 1998). The other includes various aspects of creativity and development as well. Research is also defined as a process based on the close proximity of systematic, monitored, professional intervention to improve work in the field. When activities defined as 'scholarly products' were investigated in a study in American community colleges, exhibitions, works of art and technical proficiency were included as some of the activities of the college staff (Palmer, 1992). Similarly, one of the four promotion criteria in teachers' colleges today is the development of teaching/learning materials and methods. The second approach is not covered in this paper because the first predominates at most colleges.

The Nature of Research Work: models of research activity in the colleges

Based on the data mentioned above, we discerned several models of research activity in colleges:

The Model of Independent Research

Research at the college is accomplished independently by one or more researchers, with no central research core. In this model, few studies involve several researchers. Any organisational intervention is rare and the college provides little budgetary assistance. Researcher(s) compete on an individual basis for each study, without any connection to other studies conducted at the college or access to internal college resources. The research culture is not a priority for the college.

The Star Model

In this model all or the greater part of research activity is associated with a single researcher who works with all the other researchers. In such a college the range of research is limited to the horizons and skills of the principal researcher. Reliance on a single researcher reduces the scope and quality of the research activity.

The Independent Centralised model

A core research team (generally the members of the research unit) is responsible for most of the research done at the college, but a few additional staff members gather around it. Additional staff members carry out independent work. This model keeps the proportion of collaborative studies by several researchers low, as most staff members are not even involved in research as consumers.

The Collaborative Centralised Model

A core research team (generally the members of the research unit) gathers additional staff members around it, aside from the collaboration among team members them-

selves. This team is responsible for most of the research done at the college. Because this model introduces a large number of lecturers at the college to a research culture, its contribution is more substantial than any other model. The model is based on a core of skilled personnel who stimulate research activity. The more co-operation there is among researchers and the more researchers gather around the central core, the more significant the development of the research culture at the college will be.

The Multicore Model

This is the model when two or more teams develop within a college. Each core is characterised by its form, either closed and centralised, or collaborative and centralised.

These models represent an increasingly strong college research culture. The higher one climbs the ladder from the first model to the fourth (and some would say the fifth), the more the research activity can be felt throughout the college. In some colleges several models operate simultaneously and some are in a transition stage from one to the next. Usually the change is gradual, but we also detected drastic advancement of several stages, especially as an initiative from above, imposed by the administration.

Organisation of Research Activity

Of the 13 colleges that responded to our survey questionnaire, 12 reported having a research committee and eight a research unit. Some colleges make a clear division between the research units and research committees in terms of structure and functions. At others the boundaries are less distinct.

Functions and Intensity of Activity of the Research Committees

As stated above, we found that almost every college has a research committee whose functions are: to support the implementation of research studies, to provide professional review and advisory services, propose corrections, and approve research proposals, to maintain ties with the 'MOFET' Institute, to set research priorities and allocate funds for approved studies.

The job of the research committee is to encourage research in the college by means of internal and external budgets. The activities of the college research committees are: to allocate resources (chiefly internal) to researchers, to disseminate information about sources of funding, to publicise studies in journals and conferences, to plan the study of methodology at the college, to organise workshops for college teachers on research methodology, and to take charge of external relations. The research committee also represents the college before outside funding entities.

The functions of research committees were accomplished differently among the colleges and with varying degrees of intensity:

Absence of a Research Committee

At several colleges, no one is in charge of research activity. Any research that is conducted is at the initiative of a single researcher with resources from outside the college. Such a college does not present research products or if any such products are presented, the credit clearly belongs exclusively to the researcher.

A Passive Research Committee

The committee has no resources or hardly any with which to assist the researchers. Only a few college staff are thought to be interested in and capable of research. These few are independent researchers with the appropriate skills and do not require encouragement and aid.

A Supportive Research Committee

The committee offers researchers budgetary support, methodological guidance and platforms to publicise the studies. Neither the students nor the lecturers constitute the target population.

An Initiating Research Committee

This does not merely offer assistance, but reaches out: it actively encourages researchers to apply for support, initiates fundraising efforts, and sees to the development of additional forms of assistance, such as advisory services, guidance, data processing and editing. The work of such a committee may be bolstered by a research unit that works alongside it, and can offer genuine assistance in research planning, preparation of tools, data input and processing, and professional editing and translation.

Functions of the Research Unit

The research units are responsible for the direct implementation of studies. Seybert (1991) lists the primary functions of the research units as follows: providing the administration with information by creating and maintaining essential databases, and by assistance with planning service, providing research-related services to the college and assessing projects initiated by the college, assistance with methodological and statistical matters to staff members, and sometimes students, including assistance in the various stages of research or in a specific topic in accordance with the unit's resources and actual needs.

The returned survey questionnaire that we distributed among the academic colleges showed us that the main functions of the research units, as listed by representatives of the colleges, are: feedback studies on activities in the college,

helping teachers to conduct research, promoting the college's external relations, locating research budgets and fostering the research culture of the college.

The research units are allocated from a few hours a week to the equivalent of several full-time positions divided up among numerous researchers, in addition to administrative assistance. Applications to outside sources are less common. Only a few carry out collaborative studies with researchers from different colleges. A minority of the colleges hold seminars at which they present studies; most colleges have yearbooks in which research by staff members and sometimes students can be presented. In practice, most of the research units assess educational initiatives at the college and conduct internal surveys to meet the college's own needs.

An important function of the research unit is to provide methodological and statistical assistance to the lecturers in the college.

The scope of the research unit's activity varies from college to college. The number of studies and of researchers engaged in conducting them depends chiefly on the college's ability and willingness to allocate the necessary resources. The academic colleges differ in terms of number of years their research units have been in operation, the size of their budgets, the type of activity they conduct, fundraising, the scope of their activity and their ability to assist the staff. Our impression is that there is also a considerable difference between the units in terms of the skill levels of their members. The scope of activity reflects the research culture in the college. The research units can be characterized by the intensity and scope of their activity:

Absence of a Functional Research Unit

At some colleges research committees fulfill some of the functions of the research units (primarily fundraising and less the creation of studies); other colleges have no research committee at all. Any research activity that exists takes place without a guiding, supportive research centre. This situation reflects a weak research culture, or the absence of any.

Limited Research Unit

The research unit exists, but it is not very active. The resources allocated to it by the college are quite limited, few studies are conducted and it employs few researchers. Sometimes the unit is mere lip service to research activity paid by the college, devoid of sufficient tools for implementation. This indicates an attempt to look like a research culture, but in fact without substance.

Medium Research Unit

These research units receive resources that make significant research work possible. The college allocates resources for personnel and usually several administrative hours. The unit meets the ongoing research and evaluation needs of the college and issues periodic reports. It generally works with permanent staff; most of the lecturers

at the college are not involved. There is a research culture in the college, but it is not the domain of the majority.

Active, Prominent Research Unit

Such research units have substantial resources in terms of personnel positions, administrative assistance and research budgets. The regular staff members of the unit have considerable research skills. It also initiates collaboration with researchers who are not regular members of the unit staff and its work is felt throughout the college. The prominence of its activity influences the research culture in the college and does a great deal toward promoting it.

The scope and style of activity of the research units play an important part in developing the research culture of the colleges. Yet the intensity of the research units' activity occupies an important but not exclusive role in molding the college research culture, which is determined by a combination of factors, as will be explained below.

Patterns of Research Culture in the Colleges

From the above-mentioned classification we can discern inclusive types for describing four patterns of research culture in colleges.

Absence of a Research Culture

Several colleges, especially those still striving to rise to the academic level, have no one in charge of research activity. These colleges make no institutional allocation to research and sponsor no administrative research initiatives. These are mostly colleges just entering the academisation stage and they also tend to be small. Any research done at the college is the initiative of a single researcher, who relies on resources from outside the college. Such a college does not present research products. Research is rare in such a college, where it has no backing, support or continuity. The level of methodological study is very basic. If research is done, it follows the model of independent research, which is based on individual initiatives with no organisational support. Such a college may have staff members with research skills, but they lack the organisational tools and institutional support to apply them. The quantity and scope of activity are low.

Symbolic Research Culture

The research culture is not a legitimate or significant subculture in the college. It is not an issue on the college's agenda, nor is it included in the college's long-range planning. The research bodies are intended mainly for public relations purposes and they have no chance of genuinely promoting research at the college. Research is limited, only a fairly small number of people are involved in it, and no effort is made to take advantage of it for internal evaluation or to solve problems that the college

faces. The prevalent attitude in the college is that 'whoever wants to can conduct research', and the college expects anyone who is interested to take the initiative. The responsibility for research is almost entirely the researcher's. The assumption is that the members of the college staff are first and foremost teachers, and that the research culture does not have to have an influence on the college culture. This approach, when the college has no research unit either, is best suited to the model of independent research. In such colleges there is no centralised guidance and few research studies, and the studies that are carried out are haphazard without research teams. Alternatively, these colleges may follow the multicore model, with no strong central core, leaving research to the initiative of various teams or units in the college. Most of the staff is not involved in research processes, and even the students are not exposed, directly or indirectly, to the benefits of research. This situation is characterised by all three of the obstacles noted above: budgetary difficulties, lack of research skills and organisational difficulties. Most of the colleges in this category are in the initial stage of becoming academic; they are medium-sized or small; and there is no 'principal researcher' who might have constituted a key figure in promoting research.

Optional Research Culture

When the research culture is legitimised as an important factor in the college culture and reasonable resources are allocated for promoting it, research at the college becomes a legitimate option and the college provides tools for it. The research culture is still not considered equal in value to other subcultures in the college, such as the teaching culture. In such colleges, there is generally a medium-size research unit and a supportive research committee. These research bodies, when they exist, offer assistance in the form of some budgetary support, methodological guidance, and organisation of platforms for publicising studies. A college at this stage might follow the star model if one researcher is dominant. If the scope of the research is wider, one might find an independent (closed) centralised model. Most of the staff are not exposed to and do not benefit from the activities of the research bodies, and the students make only a marginal research contribution. In these colleges the researchers contend incessantly with problems of budgets, skills and organisation. Some colleges, even when they enjoy a reasonable budget, encounter the problem of research skills. The likelihood of settling these matters successfully increases when there is long-range planning and backing from above, namely from the director. In general, medium-sized and large colleges are characterised by this research culture.

Leading Research Culture

Finally, in some colleges the research culture has a dominant, elevated status in the college culture. These colleges are marked by cultural pluralism; they allow different cultures to develop. The research culture is on the college agenda and is included in the long-range plans. This status promotes investment in the college research bodies. The research unit is an active one and the research committee takes initiative. Instead of merely offering assistance, these research bodies actually initiate

ties with the entire college staff. Researchers are actively encouraged, with repeated reminders to apply for support; fundraising initiatives are widespread; and additional forms of assistance, such as advisory services, guidance, data processing and editing, are available. Typically, the research follows the collaborative centralised model: the research unit is open to potential researchers in addition to the members of the unit. In such a college, research will presumably have an effect on the quality of instruction and on the subject matter; this potential contribution was mentioned in the beginning of this paper. In these colleges problems of budgets, research skills and organisation are much less severe. In most cases, this culture developed gradually, via the previous stages, although we did encounter colleges that went from a very preliminary stage of research culture to this high stage as a result of a dramatic initiative by the director. Colleges at this stage of research culture regard research as an important stimulus for promoting the college in the long run. All the activity has the backing of the director and administration, and they are in an advanced stage of academisation. Most of these colleges are currently preparing plans to obtain permits to develop master's degree programmes.

Conclusions

Research is important for promoting the colleges and setting them on a firm academic footing for the long term. The scope and level of research in the teachers' colleges are the product of many factors. For the purposes of the discussion we systematically distinguished different factors, but in reality the factors are interrelated and interdependent. Some colleges combine various characteristics or various parts of various characteristics simultaneously. The research culture is reflected in and reflects these characterisations. The more resources the research bodies have and the stronger they are, the more active the committee will be and the more successful it will be at reaching a larger number of lecturers and researchers, and the more important the research culture will be in the college culture.

A research culture emerges gradually both from the field and from above. From above, it develops as part of the academisation process, which is still in progress (as some colleges are applying for permission to award bachelor's degrees and the older colleges are applying for master's degree studies). As the level of academic activity grows, the push from above to entrench and expand the research culture will also grow stronger. The promotion grades, which are based, *inter alia*, on research publications, constitute an additional incentive; indeed, on our visits to the colleges we found a commendable response in places where courses were offered to fortify the research skills of staff members. The status of the research culture seems to be improving and gaining legitimacy and it is found more and more on the agenda of the colleges. However, this is a slow, evolutionary, fundamental and continuous development in which seeds give rise to roots and a trunk, and the trunk then sprouts branches, leaves and flowers. It may be possible, in a revolutionary manner, for an entire tree to be planted at once, but it will only take root and blossom if we do thorough, deliberate work over a long period of time, and ensure that the roots are given proper nutrients and the trunk is stable and strong.

Our paper indicates that the teachers' colleges have come a long way in recent years in promoting research activity and a research culture, but some still lag far behind the leaders. The differences exist not only between colleges, but within colleges. To use the research culture as an impetus for promoting a college and as assurance of its academic solidity, we have to prepare ourselves through multidimensional action in accordance with the complexity of the problem as indicated in this paper. As we discovered, each college follows its own path and most have come a long way. This paper may suggest ideas for further development.

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