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COVID-19: EDUCATION POLICY, AUTONOMY AND ALTERNATIVE TEACHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

ABSTRACT

The study evaluates an alternative initial teacher education programme launched nationwide by the Israeli Ministry of Education (MoE) at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. The programme aimed to attract unemployed academics to teaching, thereby providing a response to the teacher shortage. To advance the programme, the MoE relaxed its strict regulations and granted the training institutions further autonomy to develop their own programmes. After three months of intensive online training, students were expected to start teaching and continue studying once a week for another year while on the job during their induction year. Since teachers, unlike other hired employees, continued working from home via distance learning during this period, teaching, previously an unattractive profession, turned into a desirable one and hundreds of potential candidates applied for the programme. The research, conducted in one large teacher education college in central Israel, examined the motivations of 125 student teachers to join the teaching profession, their sense of preparedness for teaching, their satisfaction with the programme and their level of commitment to teaching. Findings showed that the student teachers who participated in our research displayed high levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. They reported a high sense of preparedness for teaching, were satisfied with the programme and indicated their commitment to the teaching profession. The results strengthen the importance of tailor-made teacher education programmes and hence the value of greater autonomy in teacher education policy.

Keywords: COVID-19; alternative teacher education programmes; education policy; autonomy; teacher shortage; Israeli teacher education colleges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which reached Israel in mid-March 2020, caused an immediate shutdown of many workplaces, resulting in a 27.5% unemployment rate. While schools closed, teachers went on working and switched to online teaching. Declaring teachers as essential workers, made teaching an alluring profession. This was a refreshing shift since the status of the teaching profession has been quite low in Israel and teachers' working conditions are less than appealing.

Israel's Ministry of Education (MoE) seized the opportunity and launched, in collaboration with the Israeli Employment Service, a newly devised alternative initial teacher education programme for postgraduates who had lost their jobs because of the Coronavirus crisis, entitling them to a teaching certificate. The programme aimed to offer accelerated online teacher training to about 450 unemployed academics nationwide and thus partially resolve the chronic massive shortage of teachers. After three months of intensive online training, students were expected to start teaching and continue studying once a week for another year while on the job during their induction year. While the programme included a rigorous screening process and its academic level was high, students did not have many opportunities to practise teaching before becoming fully fledged teachers since the schools were closed during the lockdown periods and the programme's schedule mainly covered the summer vacation period. Extensive teaching practice has been mentioned as a core feature of an effective alternative certification programme (Blazer, 2012). There is, therefore, particular interest in exploring this programme, where unusual circumstances have restricted students' exposure to schools, classrooms and pupils.

To advance the programme, the MoE has further flexed its requirements, granting teacher colleges the autonomy to develop programmes that deviate from the rigid uniform guidelines set by the Israeli Council for Higher Education that regulates and supervises all higher education institutions. This mandate gave rise to great flexibility, creativity and innovation in the format and structure of the programmes opened in the ten institutions that responded to the Ministry's call. This deviation from the standard outline of initial education programmes in Israel also calls into question the degree of success of the programmes.

The present study aimed to examine closely and assess the success of one programme with 135 participants. The research focused on the motivations of student teachers to join the teaching profession, their sense of preparedness for teaching, their satisfaction with the programme and their level of commitment to teaching. The study introduces further insights into the recent years' debate about the pros and cons of alternative teacher education programmes.

2. ALTERNATIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

In recent decades, many countries worldwide have adopted alternative teacher education programmes, alongside traditional ones (Kee, 2012; Whitford, Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2018). They include developed and developing countries such as the United States, Australia, South America (e.g., Argentina, Brazil and Chile), Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Portugal and the Netherlands), Africa (e.g. Ghana, Kenya, Uganda), Eastern Asia (e.g., China, India, Japan) and Middle East countries (e.g. Lebanon and Qatar). Among these alternative programmes are Teach for America (TFA); Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) in Chicago; American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE); Now Teach, Premier Pathways and Transition to Teach (T2T) in the UK; the Netherlands' "side-entry route" and Teach for All (TFA) organisation, which has branches in 59 countries. Most alternative programmes target college graduates who possess prior disciplinary knowledge but have no educational background and wish to take a new career direction and become teachers. They begin working as teachers at an early stage of their teacher education studies while usually often acquiring on-the-job training and participating in courses concurrently with their teaching (Haberman, 2006). As a rule, these are, therefore, short professional-oriented programmes with employment-based training (Eurydice, 2018). Despite this fundamental similarity, such programmes differ considerably in several aspects. While some are regular and ongoing,

others are provisional and launched as emergency programmes (Musett, 2010). Some of them do not abide by the national standards, while others meet national requirements and keep their standards on par. Other differences include length, degree of supervision and mentoring and incentives offered to the participants (Blazer, 2012; Carter & Keiler, 2009). The participants' backgrounds also vary. While some alternative programmes are highly selective and focus on preparing high-achieving college graduates as teachers (e.g., Teach for America), other programmes are more relaxed, focusing on forming a pool of diverse candidates. Such programmes are labelled in different countries as provisional, emergency, temporary, side-entry, lateral entry, non-traditional or alternative certificate (Ingersoll, Merrill & May, 2014; Mussett, 2010).

There are various reasons for the worldwide proliferation of these numerous alternative paths. Among the main ones are an ongoing teacher shortage in many parts of the world (Aragon, 2016; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Eurydice, 2018), the desire to attract high-quality candidates who would otherwise not opt for teaching (Boyd *et al.*, 2007; Johnson, Birkeland & Peske, 2005; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015) and a desire to diversify the composition of the teaching force to match the students' diversity (Whitford *et al.*, 2018). Underlying these pragmatic reasons is a general discontent with the poor performance and competence of students in many parts of the world. This dissatisfaction has become even more prominent in an era of national testing benchmarks and international comparisons of educational outcomes and attainment. Under the growing demand for accountability and the increasing criticism and mistrust of traditional initial teacher education programmes, the search for alternatives has become legitimate. Using neoliberal argumentations and ideology that call for decentralisation, deregulation and privatisation of education institutions, school-based programmes have gained popularity leading to more autonomy and self-governance of teacher education certification and licensure (Kretchmar, Sondel & Ferrare, 2014). Counterclaims against the proliferation of these programmes assert that a shorter certification process and that privatisation of public education will eventually lead to a de-professionalisation of teaching (Baines, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). Alternative programmes have been attributed to a variety of policies accused of depriving teacher educators of control over education for financial considerations (Henderson & Hursh, 2014).

Extensive research has examined the effectiveness of one route against the others, investigating various aspects such as the quality of participants who choose to study in each path, their motivation to become teachers, their self-efficacy and feeling of preparedness and the retention of these programmes' graduates. Studies have found that accelerated alternative programmes attract individuals who would not have considered teaching otherwise. They appeal to males, older candidates and experienced professionals more than traditional programmes (e.g., Feistritzer, 2011; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005a, 2005b). The motivations of alternatively certified candidates to choose teaching in the first place were found to be social, intrinsic career and personal utility values, similar to those reported by traditionally certified ones (Öztürk-Akar, 2019). Studies have also concluded that teachers, whether certified alternatively or traditionally, enter the classroom with similar levels of content knowledge and engage in similar teaching practices (e.g., Birkeland & Peske, 2004; Sass, 2008). However, several studies have found that alternatively certified teachers have less self-confidence and sense of preparedness than their counterparts in traditional programmes. Specifically, traditionally certified teachers report that they feel better prepared to plan instruction, meet the needs of diverse learners, create a positive learning environment, manage their classrooms,

motivate students and conduct assessments (e.g., Immerwahr *et al.*, 2007; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Finally, certain studies have suggested that alternatively certified teachers have equal – sometimes higher – retention rates than traditionally trained graduates (e.g., Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008). In contrast, other studies claim the exact opposite, showing that retention is higher in traditionally trained teachers while alternatively certified teachers display larger attrition rates (e.g., Heilig & Jez, 2014; Marder, David, & Hamrock, 2020; Ingersoll *et al.*, 2014). To date, none of the certification programmes, whether alternative or traditional, have proven to be the most effective in preparing candidates and guiding them into the teaching profession. Yet, it has been suggested that for an alternative programme to be effective, it should include a rigorous screening process, a rich academic coursework component and ample opportunities to practise teaching (Blazer, 2012). The current research has focused on one recent alternative teacher education programme launched in Israel at the height of the COVID-19 epidemic to deal with the resulting crisis. While the programme included a rigorous screening process and a high academic level, the students did not have the opportunity to experience teaching in schools due to the general lockdown. Moreover, the special circumstances that led to the opening of the programme were also the reason why the educational policymakers loosened the strict regulation and allowed colleges a certain degree of freedom and autonomy in devising the programme and implementing it.

3. TEACHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

Initial teacher education in Israel is primarily a traditional one with two main tracks. The first and most prevalent one, provided by teacher education colleges, is the four-year programme that combines a Bachelor of Education degree with a teaching certificate in a certain school subject for a specified age group. The second track involves a one-year programme, either at teacher education colleges or at universities, offering a teaching certificate to postgraduate who have already acquired a bachelor's degree or even Master's degree in a certain field and now wish to switch to a teaching career (Postgraduate certificate in Education, PGCE).

A massive and chronic teacher shortage existing in the Hebrew-school system in many school subjects at all levels of education, has spurred the MoE to search for alternative pathways of teacher preparation in the past decade (Donitsa-Schmidt & Weinberger, 2014). These alternative pathways have a twofold purpose: increasing the number of teachers in the education system and attracting high-quality candidates who would not have joined in had it not been for the alternative pathway. Attracting high-quality candidates and retaining them in the education system is a major challenge given the low status of the teaching profession in Israel (Dolton *et al.*, 2018), which results directly from teachers' low wages and unappealing working conditions (OECD, 2018). National statistics show that only 75% of teaching programme graduates actually enter into teaching and the turnover and teacher attrition in the first years of teaching is high (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016).

The MoE launched its first alternative initial teacher education programme in 2009, following the global economic crisis of 2008 (Donitsa-Schmidt & Weinberger, 2014). Since then, it has opened a dozen additional programmes. While some of these programmes are permanent and open annually, such as Teach First Israel (Amichai & Ron, 2018) others are offered ad hoc for specific purposes. Although these alternative programmes vary, most of them share the following features: they are shorter, more accelerated and more condensed than the traditional programmes. They are designed to recruit promising motivated future teachers endowed with the core competencies required to have a positive impact on the education system. Most

programmes offer incentives such as tuition discounts and scholarships extended by various institutes and funds. Despite the contrast between the alternative and traditional paths of the programmes, they are all closely regulated by their governing bodies.

Teacher education programmes in Israel are run in universities but mostly in colleges of education and operate under direct supervision of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) or the MoE. Accordingly, the budgeting bodies are the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the CHE or the MoE. Yet, regardless of the body in charge, all teacher education programmes must abide by a framework set in 2006 by a joint CHE and MoE committee that determined the standards and guidelines for all the training of teachers in higher education institutions (Dror, 2013). This framework, known as the *Ariav* Guidelines, provides a template for all the traditional and alternative teacher certification programmes, determining their structure, duration, number of teaching hours, academic content and relative weight of their various components. The MoE also sets criteria for admission, appointing teaching staff members and curriculum supervision. A teaching license issued by the MoE at the end of the first year of teaching, i.e. the induction year, is another mechanism to monitor and regulate the programmes.

This highly centralised and regulated system with very little autonomy (Iram, 1990) does not apply exclusively to the teacher training institutes. The entire education system is highly centralised, strictly controlled and closely monitored (Nir *et al.*, 2016). Having almost no autonomy, colleges of education are obliged to comply with the CHE regulations in the programmes they offer to their students.

As mentioned, the focus of this paper is a unique alternative initial teacher education programme launched at the height of the COVID-19 breakout. It stands out for having received a fairly broad academic freedom in formulating its structure and content. Since research studies conducted in Israel on alternative programmes are scant and the degree of these programmes' effectiveness is inconclusive (Weinberger & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2016), this research will broaden the existing knowledge on the effectiveness of these routes.

4. AN ALTERNATIVE INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME DURING COVID-19

Similar to many countries around the world, thousands of workers in Israel lost their jobs during the Coronavirus crisis. At the end of March 2020, two weeks after the epidemic's outbreak in Israel, unemployment rose to an all-time high of almost 20 per cent. At the end of April 2020, when the crisis was at its height, the unemployment rate reached 27.5%, with more than a million jobless people. To illustrate the severity of this situation, in February 2020, a month before the crisis broke out, the unemployment rate in Israel was only 3.9 per cent. Although in mid-May 2020, some of the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed and businesses reopened, 25 per cent of the workforce remained unemployed (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

The only ones who were permitted to continue working were those defined as "essential workers", including teachers who, despite the closed down schools, continued working from home via distance learning (MoE, 2020a). Declaring teachers as essential workers turned teaching into an attractive profession. The MoE seized this opportunity and launched, in collaboration with the Israeli Employment Service, a new alternative initial teacher education programme for a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) named "*Kivun-Hadash*" (new direction) and intended for postgraduate candidates in all the core school subjects

(Maariv Daily, 2020). The aim of this accelerated programme was to train 450 academics countrywide as teachers of core school subjects in kindergartens, elementary or secondary schools. Recruiting 450 committed, motivated, high-quality academics was meant to solve the shortage of teachers and elevate the quality of the teaching workforce.

The prerequisites for entering the new programme were a Bachelor's degree in the relevant discipline (e.g., Mathematics, Biology, Bible) and a screening process that included an interview and group dynamics to ensure the candidate's suitability for the programme and the teaching profession. All the participants were entitled to monetary incentives including a scholarship and unemployment benefits. The first part of the training lasted 13 weeks, five days a week, from mid-May to the end of August. The theoretical and the pedagogical components were all online. In September 2020, students were expected to start teaching in schools. During their induction year, while on the job, they went on studying for a day and a half every week.

An open call with exceptionally flexible guidelines was issued to all 21 academic teacher education colleges and nine university education faculties to take on board the programme. Consequently, nine teacher education colleges and one university opened the programme (MoE, 2020b). The Israeli Employment Service identified candidates whose profile appeared suitable and sent them to the colleges for further screening. In less than two weeks, hundreds of candidates approached the colleges and the 350 best-qualified ones entered the programme. The profile of the students in this alternative teacher education programme was different from that of the students of traditional programmes including the traditional PGCE one. They were generally older, more educated with many holding a Master's degree and had more occupational experience relevant to their areas of teaching than students in the traditional programmes.

In contrast to the strict guidelines that characterise teacher education programmes in Israel, in this case, the institutions that opened this alternative programme were allowed the autonomy to devise their programmes. This flexibility granted by the MoE facilitated putting together a different, more creative and malleable training programme even within the set boundaries of the *Ariav* training guidelines (CHE, 2006). First, the entire training took place on synchronous and asynchronous online platforms. This had never been done before, since one of the CHE restrictions determined that online learning could not exceed 30 per cent of a programme (CHE, 2018). Second, the training institutions were instructed to complete the bulk of the training in three months, from mid-May to mid-August, so that students could be integrated into the teaching force as early as September, the beginning of the school year. Since the schools were closed in May and June and a two-month summer vacation began in July, the training included very little regular school practicum. Contrary to the usual outline, the MoE relinquished the rule that required completing the practical experience component before beginning to teach in practice (MoE, 2014). This enabled the training institutions to continue guiding their students on the job, during their first year of teaching, i.e. their internship. With online teaching and learning becoming the new norm, all regularities had dissolved, including frameworks of time, space, scope and teaching mode.

Although the recruitment was successful and hundreds of candidates registered, it is still unknown how many of them will succeed as teachers and remain in the education system in the next few years. This point has even greater importance considering the open criticism against

the programme aired in the Israeli media, accusing it of being liable of further deteriorating the professionalism of teaching and teachers (e.g., Globes Daily 2020).

5. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the research was to evaluate the unique COVID-19 alternative teacher education programme at the end of its first phase through the following three research questions:

1. To what extent did the programme succeed in attracting highly motivated students to teaching and has it succeeded in preparing students for teaching?
2. To what extent were the students satisfied with the training programme?
3. What was the level of commitment to teaching among the students at the end of the first part of the programme?

6. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The current study focuses on one teacher education college that offered the alternative programme. As part of the MoE modus operandi, each of the ten institutions that took part in the COVID-19 alternative programme received a mandate to design their own curricular programme. The curriculum built in the college where the current research was conducted mainly focused on education courses and pedagogical studies in its first phase. Pedagogy included general pedagogy and pedagogical content knowledge. The practical part was implemented through distance learning and peer teaching. The number of disciplinary courses taught during the first three months was limited. In addition to the pedagogical guidance, personal guidance was also given to facilitate the sharp transition from unemployment to intensive studies and entering the education system. The second part of the programme that overlapped the induction year was designed to include additional disciplinary courses in keeping with the academic background of each student and further pedagogical instruction.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A short anonymous self-report questionnaire was sent online via Google forms to all 135 student teachers enrolled in the alternative programme in one teacher education college at the end of the first part of the programme. Under the code of ethics, participation was voluntary. A total of 125 students filled in the questionnaire in two weeks, i.e., a 93% response rate. The two researchers who were involved in developing the programme at the college and screening the candidates also conducted the present study. This information was overt and explicitly written on the questionnaire. They were asked to answer the questionnaire as candidly as possible and were assured that they will remain anonymous. To avoid any ethical conflicts, the questionnaire was administered at the end of the first part of the programme and after all the students had successfully completed this chapter of their studies and received approval to find work in the education system.

7.1 Participants

Of the 125 student teachers that responded to our questionnaire, 89 (71%) were female and 36 (29%) were male; their ages ranged from 24 to 62, average age – 42 (SD 8.5). Most of them were Israeli-born and native speakers of Hebrew. They came from various occupational areas in the public and private sectors and had all lost their jobs following the COVID-19 outbreak.

Their education varied greatly including the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, economics and exact sciences. Fifty-eight per cent hold a Bachelor's degree and 41% hold a Master's degree.

Within the teaching education programme, 13 (10%) studied early childhood education, 59 (47%) studied teaching in the elementary school track and 53 (42%) studied teaching in the secondary school track. The disciplinary distribution of the 112 students that studied in the elementary school and high school tracks were as follows : 33 (29%) – Hebrew language and literature teachers, 29 (23%) – Judaic studies, 27 (24%) – math teachers, 13 (11%) – science teachers and 9 (8%) – history and social sciences teachers. One participant did not specify his/her subject matter.

7.2 Research instrument

The anonymous self-report questionnaire comprised several subsections of which only the ones relevant to the purpose of the current research are presented:

1. Personal information and educational background
2. *Motivation to become a teacher*: This part was taken from the third Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) for teachers conducted in 2018 (OECD, 2019). Participants were asked to rate the importance of seven factors affecting their motivation to become a teacher on a five-point scale ("not important at all", "low importance", "moderate importance", "high importance", "very high importance"). In an exploratory factor analysis of the seven items, a two-factor solution emerged, explaining 69 per cent of the total variance (36% and 33% respectively). The first factor (4 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) reflected extrinsic motivations for choosing teaching, including job security, work conditions and economic reasons. The second factor (3 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.83) reflected intrinsic motivations including contribution to society, benefitting disadvantaged populations, and influencing young people.
3. *Sense of preparedness for teaching*: Ten items, also taken from TALIS 2018, explored the extent to which teachers felt prepared for teaching after receiving formal education or training (OECD, 2019). Although this was not stated explicitly, the items related to the following types of knowledge suggested by Shulman (1987): content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of the learner and knowledge of teaching twenty-first century skills. All ten items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 represented a high degree of self-reported readiness to teach. In addition to scrutinising each item separately, all the items underwent an exploratory factor analysis, which yielded a one factor solution explaining 65 per cent of the total variance, with all the loadings above 0.64; Cronbach's alpha = 0.94.
4. *Satisfaction with the teacher education programme*: Satisfaction was measured using a single item on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, where 5 represented a high level of satisfaction.
5. *Commitment to the teaching profession*: Four items were used to determine commitment: (a) Will you be teaching next year? (yes, no, maybe); (b) How many hours will you teach every week? (c) Will you be a homeroom teacher? (yes, no, maybe); (d) How many years do you plan to remain in the teaching profession?

8. FINDINGS

The presentation of findings corresponds with the themes of the three research questions:

8.1 Motivations to become a teacher

Table 1 displays the percentages of teachers who attached moderate or high importance to becoming a teacher in each of the seven motivations of three groups: student teachers in the current research (N=125), national figures of Israel in TALIS 2018 for Hebrew-speaking schools (N=1,520) and the OECD average in TALIS 2018.

Table 1: Motivation to become a teacher (% of moderate and high importance)

Factor		Current research	TALIS 2018 ⁽¹⁾	
			Israel	OECD
Intrinsic motivation	Teaching allows me to influence the development of children and young people	99% (=)	97%	92%
	Teaching allows me to provide a contribution to society	97% (=)	96%	88%
	Teaching allows me to benefit the socially disadvantaged	95% (=+)	91%	75%
Extrinsic motivation	Teaching offers a steady career path	92% (+)	66%	61%
	Teaching was a secure job	90% (+)	66%	71%
	The teaching schedule fits with responsibilities in my personal life	86% (=+)	71%	66%
	Teaching provided a reliable income	45% (=/-)	42%	67%

Source: OECD (2019), TALIS 2018 Database, Table I.4.1

Percentages are higher (+), lower (-) or similar (=) compared to the Israeli average and OECD average

The most important motivations reported by the teachers-to-be in the current study were the intrinsic ones ($M=4.56$; $SD=0.62$) found to be significantly higher [$t(124\text{ df})=12.35$; $p<.001$] than the extrinsic ones ($M=3.47$; $SD=0.82$). These results seem to correspond to those found in TALIS 2018 among a representative sample of Israeli teachers and in other OECD countries. However, the extrinsic motivations of job security and steady career path seemed to have more influence on choosing teaching as a career in the current research than in the two other groups, while income was rated as a much lower motivation by both Israeli groups compared to the OECD average.

8.2 Sense of preparedness for teaching

Table 2 presents the percentages of student teachers who reported having a high or moderate sense of preparedness for teaching in each of the knowledge components. Percentages are presented for the teachers-to-be in the current research (N=125), national figures of Israel in TALIS 2018 for Hebrew-speaking schools (N=1,520) and the OECD average in TALIS 2018.

Table 2: Sense of preparedness for teaching (% of those who felt “prepared” and “well prepared”)

	Current research	TALIS 2018	
		Israel ⁽²⁾	OECD
Use of information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching	77%(+)	41%	43%
Teaching cross-curricular skills (e.g. creativity, critical thinking, problem solving)	71% (+)	54%	49%

	Current research	TALIS 2018	
		Israel ⁽²⁾	OECD
Pedagogy of the subject(s) I teach	71% (=)	78%	71%
General pedagogy	71% (=)	75%	70%
Classroom practice in the subject(s) I teach	70% (=)	75%	71%
Teaching in a mixed ability setting	69% (+)	54%	44%
Content of the subject(s) I teach	66% (-)	84%	80%
Teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting	59% (+)	28%	26%
Student behaviour and classroom management	54% (=)	53%	53%
Monitoring students' development and learning	53% (=)	49%	53%

Source: OECD (2019), TALIS 2018 Database, Table I.4.20

Percentages are higher (+), lower (-) or similar (=) compared to the Israeli average and OECD average

Based on the ten items of preparedness for teaching, the overall mean in our research was 3.61 out of 5 (SD=0.81), reflecting a sense of medium to high preparedness. A comparison of the percentages of the three groups revealed that teachers-to-be in the current research felt less prepared in the contents of the subjects they teach (66% as opposed to 84% and 80%). Yet they felt much more prepared in four areas: use of ICT, teaching twenty-first century skills, teaching mixed ability groups and teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting. In the other five areas – general pedagogy, pedagogy of the subjects, classroom practices, classroom management and monitoring of students' learning – a similar sense of preparedness emerged to that of Israeli teachers' and OECD averages.

8.3 Satisfaction with the programme

Figure 1 presents a bar graph of the frequency distribution of student teachers' degree of satisfaction with the first part of their training programme.

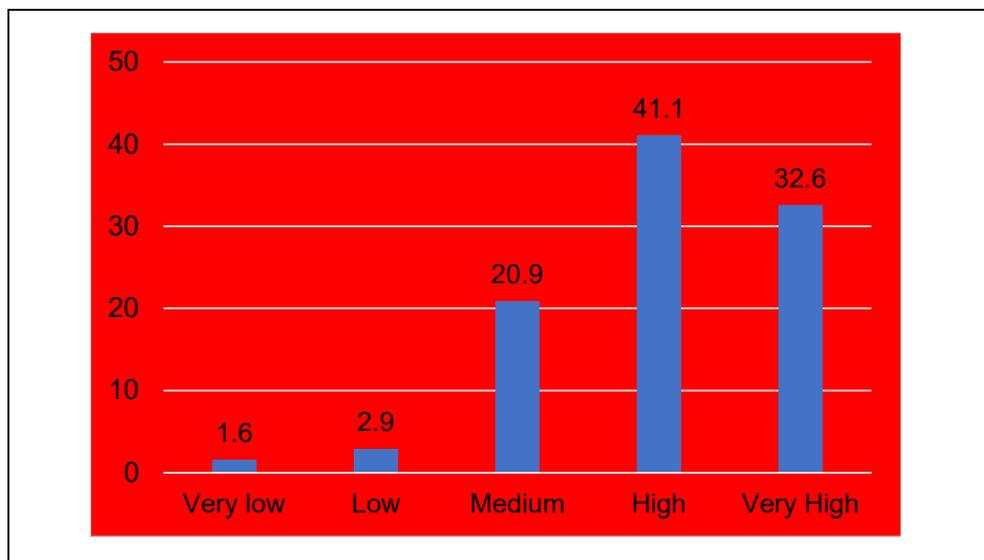


Figure1: Satisfaction with the teacher education programme

As can be seen, a high degree of satisfaction was expressed at the end of the first phase of the programme with a mean of 3.99 ($SD=0.91$). A significant positive correlation was found between the degree of satisfaction and sense of preparedness ($r=0.33$; $p<.001$). Students who expressed low satisfaction indicated that they were disappointed about not having sufficient opportunities to practise teaching.

8.4 Commitment to the teaching profession

Commitment was examined via four aspects: the percentage of student teachers who entered into teaching at the end of the first part of the programme; their teaching workload during the first year of teaching; additional roles they took on in school and the number of years participants planned to remain in teaching as an indication of teacher attrition.

Out of 125 student teachers, 103 (82%) began teaching at the end of the first phase of their teaching programme and 6 (5%) wrote that they were still looking for a teaching position. Sixteen student teachers (13%) wrote that they do not plan to teach this year for various reasons such as pregnancy and maternity leave, concerns about exposure to the Coronavirus, economic reasons and personal reasons. All but one wrote that they were planning to start teaching in the following year.

Weekly teaching hours ranged between 12 weekly hours (the minimum permitted for the induction year) and 36 or 40 hours, which is the maximum allowed in kindergarten or elementary schools and in secondary schools respectively. The average weekly teaching hours for kindergarten and elementary school teachers was 29 ($SD=8$) out of 36 hours (80% of full job hours) and 26 ($SD=10$) out of 40 (65%) for those working in secondary schools.

Out of the 103 who had begun teaching, 48 (47%) assumed an additional role of a homeroom teacher – 50% of the primary schoolteachers and 36% of the secondary school teachers [$\text{Chi-square}=4.95$; $p<.05$].

Finally, as displayed in Table 3, only 21% of the student teachers in the alternative programme announced that they wished to leave the profession within the next five years. These figures resemble those found among Israeli teachers in general and all OECD countries. Out of those who said they intended to continue working for longer than 5 years, 29% stated they aimed to teach for six to ten years and 50% stated they aimed to teach for more than eleven years. None of the student teachers indicated that they had no intention to enter teaching at all.

Table 3: Commitment to teaching

	Current research	TALIS 2018	
		Israel ⁽²⁾	OECD
Teachers' wanting to leave teaching within the next five years	21% ⁽⁼⁾	22%	25%

Source: OECD (2019), TALIS 2018 Database, Table II.2.63

Percentages are higher (+), lower (-) or similar (=) compared to the Israeli average and OECD average

9. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present research revealed that students who took the alternative teacher education programme that was initiated to respond to the COVID-19 crisis displayed high levels of intrinsic motivation, similar to the Israeli average and higher than the OECD average. These motivations, which are altruistic in nature and have a high social utility value are to be expected in high-quality people who are committed to teaching (Heinz, 2015). This sense of commitment is also reflected in the high percentage of students who see themselves continuing in the teaching profession for more than five years, of whom many are interested in pursuing this career for more than ten years. These findings are gratifying considering that teacher motivation and commitment are known to be crucial for the future success of education and school and that quality education cannot be achieved unless teachers are motivated, enthusiastic and truly committed to their students' education and to the teaching profession (Richardson & Watt, 2014).

Yet, the findings also showed an especially high extrinsic motivation to become teachers in student teachers compared to the international average and the average of other Israeli teachers. This finding is not surprising given that the programme was created during the COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing economic crisis and mass layoffs. Since all students were unemployed and their chances of getting back to work in the near future were slim, they were looking for a steady position that would guarantee them job stability and economic security. These findings corroborate previous research that has shown that various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations combined usually affect people's decision to opt for a teaching career (e.g. Watt & Richardson, 2008). Interestingly, a reliable income was not a decisive consideration in choosing teaching as a career path, probably given the low wages of teachers in Israel, particularly beginners (OECD, 2018). It is reasonable to assume that the higher percentage of students who started working in teaching immediately upon completion of the first part of their training, which was higher than usual in Israel, probably results from an intrinsic orientation to become a teacher combined with pragmatic considerations. This is also true regarding the number of weekly teaching hours that the student teachers undertook in their first year of teaching, which was higher than that of other Israeli teachers in their induction year.

Our findings also reveal that the student teachers' sense of preparedness for teaching was rather high after three months of intensive study. In nine out of ten aspects of teaching, the sense of preparedness for teaching was either higher or similar to that of other Israeli teachers and the OECD average. These findings are encouraging considering the brevity and condensed nature of the programme, particularly since most of the practical component was largely reduced to observing schoolteachers' online teaching and online peer-teaching and micro-teaching. Very few student teachers visited schools and those who managed to practise actual teaching did it mostly online via distance learning. Since the entire programme of the first three months was conducted online, it is no wonder that the sense of preparedness for teaching was highest in using ICT for teaching and in teaching twenty-first century skills. In this respect, what initially appeared to be a drawback of the programme and elicited extensive public criticism, turned out to be a major advantage for those student teachers since most of the school teaching remained remote in their first year of teaching. A criticism often expressed against teachers' education is that it is detached from the actual situation in the schools, forcing beginner teachers to undergo "re-education" when they enter the schools (Hoffman & Nederland, 2010; Wilson & Tamir, 2008). In the current case, the opposite occurred,

and students were effectively trained for a reality to which the education system had not yet adjusted.

The study also revealed a strong sense of preparedness for the pedagogical aspects of teaching. This finding stands in contrast to previous research findings according to which practical training was essential to any teacher education programme and particularly an alternative one (Blazer, 2012). We assume that this finding springs from the programme's rigorous screening processes, which were also mentioned to be a vital element in effective alternative teacher education programmes, from extensive peer-teaching, which is known to enhance learning (Sen, 2010; Benson & Ying, 2013), a strong self-efficacy in operating distance learning and a programme that was tailored to a specific population in a particular situation (Feiman-Nemser, Tamir & Hammerness, 2014).

The only aspect where the student teachers reported a lower sense of preparedness was the content knowledge in the school subject they were preparing to teach. This finding may be explained by the structure of the programme which focused mostly on education and teaching studies at its first part. Due to time constraints, some of the discipline courses were postponed to the second year of the programme, while the student teachers were already teaching. It would be worthwhile to re-examine the student teachers' sense of preparedness regarding content knowledge at the end of the second year.

The results of the study, which indicate high student satisfaction and high levels of readiness for teaching, substantiate the claim that the much criticised one-size model of traditional teacher education programmes does not fit all (Feiman-Nemser *et al.*, 2014). Rather, it underscores the need for putting together teacher preparation programmes that are tailored to specific populations and needs. While the field of education has warmly embraced the concepts of differential and personalised teaching and learning (Patrick, Kennedy & Powell, 2013), teacher education programmes are somewhat lagging (Baran, 2014; Kommers & Hooreman, 2009). If teachers are expected to provide differential and personalised teaching, teacher education programmes should "walk the talk" and alternative teacher education programmes are one way to achieve this goal. The current COVID-19 teacher education programme proves this right, having deviated from deep rooted customs and regularities to match the target audience and the peculiarities of the time. It affirms that the MoE's decision to relax the strict regulations and grant more autonomy to the training institutions was the right move to make, resulting in an alternative teacher education programme whose graduates are up to par with those trained traditionally. As Ball (2012) noted, this is a case where policy makers have utilised "policy windows" speedily and optimally, finding a suitable solution to an existing problem, in our case the rising unemployment problem of academics alongside a severe shortage of quality teachers. The hasty launching of the programme by the policy makers and its rapid activation and implementation by the teacher education colleges, have brought about a disruptive innovation capable of solving societal problems such as unemployment, a general teacher shortage, particularly a shortage in quality teachers. A market-oriented neoliberal explanation would define this programme as a start-up (Ellis, Steadman & Trippedstad, 2019). Yet, it is too early to tell whether this new ad-hoc policy, seized by the MoE's policy makers to exploit a political momentum, would turn into a new policy trend (Kingdon, 1995), one that will continue expanding the sovereignty of teacher education colleges.

As any other study, the present study has limitations that call for caution. First, we conducted the study in one teacher education college while the programme was implemented

in nine other institutions, including one university teacher education unit. We chose this specific college because it had the highest number of students enrolled in the programme compared to all the other institutions, whose student numbers ranged from 8 to 65. Future studies should investigate the entire student population of this unique ad hoc alternative teacher education programme. Enlarging the sample size would facilitate generalisation of the findings to other alternative certification programmes. Second, despite the positive results of the current research, the situation, once the COVID-19 epidemic is over, remains to be seen. It will be interesting to find out how many of the student teachers continue teaching and how many will go back to their previous professions. As Koehler *et al.* (2013: 45) state "...recruitment is only half of the battle. Retention of new teachers can be a daunting task". Follow-up studies are needed to further examine this question.

The findings of this research study have multiple implications for future research but mostly for policy making. It affirms the need to allow different initial teacher education programmes to coexist simultaneously, each meeting different needs. As noted by Musset (2010: 11) countries can "customize" teacher education programmes according to their specific needs and traditions, and alternative teacher education programmes should not be seen as competing, but rather as complementary. In that sense, it supports the claim that "many factors contribute to teachers' effectiveness... The route through which certification is obtained is just one of these factors" (Blazer, 2012: 7). The current study also validates the importance of granting more autonomy to teacher education institutions. It iterates the claim that the "regulation [of teacher education] serves the democratic state less well than a more autonomous form of education" (Bates, 2004: 117) and that "the role of governments is not to regulate the technical details of teacher education ... but, rather, to regulate the conditions of teaching and of teacher education in ways that preserve the autonomy of educators..." (Bates, 2004: 128).

Finally, on a positive note, amidst the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus and its countless negative ramifications, the pandemic may prove to have some positive long-term effects on the future of education and teacher education. A recent study that examined over 30,000 Florida teachers and their students found that teachers who entered the profession during a labour-market downturn were significantly more effective than those who started teaching when the economy was stronger (Nagler, Piopiunik & West, 2020). Since weaker job markets offer a window of opportunity for hiring stronger teachers, cohorts of teachers hired during recessions have been found to have a large share of exceptionally strong performers. Follow-up research studies on the Israeli COVID-19 alternative initial teacher education programme will hopefully come up with similar conclusions.

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