Pre-service Teachers' Perception of Readiness to Teach in Light of Teachers' Standards

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Abstract This study examines the extent to which the graduate teachers from Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) meet Teachers' Standards which are set by the Ministry of Education in Bahrain (MoE). In particular, the study explores the extent to which pre-service teachers at BTC are equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to implement these standards. Mixed research methods were employed to conduct this study. On one hand the findings revealed that the results were mixed regarding the pre-service teachers' perceptions of readiness to teach in relation to content knowledge, dealing with parents, school administration and MoE. On the other hand, they indicate that pre-service teachers show strong agreement with the effectiveness of the BTC's teacher education program in preparing them to implement the Teachers' Standards (*Mean* = 4.10, *SD* = 0.85).

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1. Introduction

As the effectiveness of teacher education programs and the demand of high-quality teachers and teaching were given more attention in recent years, teacher education programs around the world are called upon to align their learning outcomes with national Teachers' Standards. Governments demand that pre-service teachers are to be competent in several areas before being licensed to teach in schools. As part of the appraisal arrangements for schools, as Batchford [1] states, teachers' performance is assessed against Teachers' Standards which "set out the minimum requirements for teachers' professional practice and conduct" (p.1). Moreover, teacher professional training and certification is crucial for students' achievement as "certified teachers consistently produce stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers" [2] (p.2). Hence, teacher education programs around the world are expected to align their learning outcomes with national Teachers' Standards. Noteworthy consideration has been given to "policies governing the supply and quality of teachers, [focusing] on the need for nationwide standards in licensure testing, the quality of teacher education programs, alternate routes into teaching, academic requirements, induction programs, and hiring and tenure practices" [3] (p.2)

In July 2017, the Bahrain Ministry of Education (MoE), which is responsible of administering educational policies and provision; together with Bahrain Teachers College Board of Directors, agreed on setting new Teachers' Standards and requested that all stakeholders are to put these standards in action. These Teachers Standards are made up of 5 main domains within which a clear baseline of expectations is set for teacher practice and conduct in the forms of: a) commitment to the profession; b) commitment to pupils; c) commitment to teaching and learning; d) commitment to parents and guardians, and e) commitment to society school and Ministry. Teachers' Standards, as Blatchford [1] pinpoints do not "prescribe in detail what good or outstanding teaching looks like". On the contrary, they only aid teachers in making the decisions, "by providing a clear framework within which such judgments can be made" (p.3). It proved challenging to bridge the gap between policy and practice when it comes to education reform. For example, in its attempts to improve classroom practices, the Singaporean Ministry of Education admitted that there is "distance between its policy priorities and classroom practices." [4]

Since Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) is the only institute in Bahrain that has been responsible of the preparation and training of pre-service teachers, implementing the new Bahrain Teachers' Standards becomes its direct responsibility. This study explores the effectiveness of BTC's teacher education program in preparing pre-service teachers to implement the new Teachers' Standards issued by the MoE in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:
1. To what extent does the teacher preparation program at Bahrain Teachers College align with the MoE new Teachers' Standards?

2. How do pre-service teachers at BTC perceive readiness to teach in view of the new Ministry of Education Teachers' Standards?

3. Are pre-service teachers at BTC equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to implement the new MoE Teachers' Standards?

2. Conceptual Framework

As a framework for this study, the researchers have adopted Danielson's [5] "Framework for Teaching" which shows strong correlation with the MoE's new Teachers' Standards. Danielson explains the generic nature of the framework for teaching as follows: "… beneath the unique features of each situation are powerful communalities. It is these commonalities that the framework addresses" (p.22). The suitability of the alignment of the "framework for teaching" with this study is reflected in Danielson's following statement: "Many teacher educators, both in the United States and in other countries, have found the framework for teaching to be of value as they structure their programs to prepare students for the demanding and important work of teaching" [5] (p. 11). Most importantly, the framework is built on the constructivist theoretical understanding, which is very much aligned with the approach that the researchers adopt in this study. Additional advantage of using the Framework for Teaching is its generic nature which means it can be used to evaluate teachers at different levels throughout the education system; a concept that has been used in the design of the Bahrain Teachers' Standards.

3. Literature Review

Teacher education programs have been the subject of reform in several countries as a result of the high demands by governments that pre-service teachers are to be competent in a number of areas before being licensed to teach in schools. Many researchers attributed the call for high quality education to "globalization of international standards, and the increase of marketization of education" [6]. In this view, the preparation of teachers in college or university teacher education programs, and government certification standards, all too often lack adequate rigor, breadth and depth, resulting in high levels of underqualified teachers and low student performance. However, teacher education programs that try to load their pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills may not be successful.

One tool to reform teacher education programs is the development of educational standards [7] (p.57). Blatchford [1], who connected Teachers' Standards directly to teaching quality, argues that "in essence, the standards had to raise the bar and highlight the characteristics of good teaching…which define the level of practice at which all qualified teachers should be expected to perform" (p.3). Ingersoll [8] comparative study of teacher preparation programs in six countries, where the central government is responsible for teacher preparation and qualification, came out with findings which indicate that low-quality of teaching is attributed to "inadequate and insufficient pre-employment training and licensing or certification of prospective teachers."

To assert that the success of schooling is determined by teachers' quality, Schleicher [9], examined 25 schools around the world including schools in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The practices of these top school systems suggest that three things matter most: "a) getting the right people to become teachers, b) developing them into effective instructors and, c) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child". (p. 1). Moreover, in their study that investigates the correlation between teacher preparation and effectiveness, Darling-Hammond [10] claim that teachers' effectiveness appears strongly related to the preparation they have received for teaching; highlighting the point that "improving professional learning for educators is a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement." (p. 3). In view of this, Crocker and Dibbon [11] found out that 60% of the teacher candidates felt they were 'fairly well prepared for teaching'. Their study also revealed that the majority of graduates felt that greater emphasis on teaching practice would have been beneficial. On the other hand, in his report for the European Commission on education and training, Caena [12] clarifies that teachers' quality is significantly and positively correlated with student attainment and performance; highlighting the necessity of "focusing on high quality teaching as key prerequisite for high quality education and training" (p. 2).

There are many ways that are used to assess the effectiveness of teacher education programs. While many researchers argue that teacher education effectiveness is driven by students' learning outcomes, "the central tenet of the new focus on outcomes is that the effectiveness of teacher preparation can and ought to be assessed in terms of teachers; impact on outcomes," [13] the Framework for Teaching categorizes teachers in four groups based on their performance which are, "unsatisfactory, basic, proficient and distinguished" [4]. On the other hand, Goe and Stickler [14] focus on four categories of teacher quality indicators"— teacher qualifications, teacher characteristics, teacher practices, and teacher effectiveness" (p. 2). Researchers such as Fieman-Neser [15] suggest that "If pre-service teacher educator could count on introduction programs to build on and extend their work, they could concentrate on laying a foundation for beginning teaching and preparation novices to learn in and from practice" (p. 1016).

4. Methodology

The study employed mixed research methods: quantitative as a primary data collection method through a questionnaire; and qualitative as a secondary data collection method through open-ended questions. The use of the mixed methods is to triangulate the data collection as well as the data analysis so deeper understanding can be attained. SPSS program was used in analyzing the quantitative data, while a coding scheme was used to analyze the qualitative data.

4.1. Participants

The study sample consisted of 87 BTC's pre-service teachers in their final semester, representing various academic divisions. The student teachers were asked to respond to a validated questionnaire that consisted of 34 questions covering 6 different sections to solicit responses about the extent to which BTC's teacher education program is preparing them to implement the Bahraini MoE Teachers' Standards.

4.2. Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study covers 5 major areas related to teachers' competencies as presented in Bahrain Teachers' Standards. Each area consists of a number of statements which are rated on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from one (Strongly Disagree) to five (Strongly Agree). All of the statements in this questionnaire were adopted from the MoE's new Teachers' Standards. The questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in the field. As for the reliability of all 34 statements used in the questionnaire the calculated Cronbach's Alpha equals 0.946 which indicates that the items included in the data collection tools are free from errors that affect the measurement. Besides the questionnaire, an open-ended question has been added at the end of the questionnaire to collect qualitative responses from the subjects.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Quantitative Data

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' perception on Commitment to Profession

Questionnaire Statements	N	M	SD
Provide a caring and safe environment	87	4.48	.588
Set high expectations of the students	87	4.29	.820
Demonstrate positive professional values	87	4.32	.785
Recognize and respect the uniqueness and individuality of the students	87	4.49	.663
Be committed to equality and accommodate diversity.	87	4.37	.794
Protect the confidentiality of information about learners	87	4.26	.706
Respect the dignity and rights of all learners	87	4.59	.620
Improve the quality of my professional knowledge	87	4.44	.773
Overall		4.41	0.72

The results in Table 1 above evidently reveals that the participants strongly agreed that the BTC teacher education program significantly contributed in preparing them to implement the Teachers' Standards in relation to the commitment to the profession with statistical mean ranged between (4.3 – 4.6) and standard deviation ranged between (0.6 - = 0.8). Although all statements in this section received high score in the pre-service teacher's responses, "respecting the dignity and rights of all learners" received the highest statistical mean (M= 4.59). Such result is central to the effectiveness of any teacher

education program. This indicates that the BTC's training program is effective in preparing pre-service teachers to create safe learning environment. Most importantly it promises future teachers who will observe and promote human rights in their classrooms. "The goal of a human rights-based approach to education is simple: to assure every child a quality education that respects and promotes her or his right to dignity and optimum development" [16] (p. 1).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the overall students' perceptions on BTC program

Types of Commitment	Means	STD
Commitment to Profession	4.41	0.72
Commitment to Students	4.21	0.77
Commitment to Teaching and Learning	4.16	0.84
Commitment to Parents	3.45	1.14
Commitment to School, Community and MoE	4.25	0.78
Overall	4.10	0.85

It can be seen from the data in Table 2 that the responses of the pre-service teachers who participated in this study showed strong agreement that BTC's teacher education program is helpful in preparing them to implement the Teachers' Standards required by the Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Bahrain (*Mean*=4.10, *SD*=0.85). While the effectiveness of BTC program to prepare pre-service teachers to be committed to the profession received the highest score (*Mean* = 4.41), the program effectiveness to prepare pre-service teachers to be committed to parents received the lower score (*Mean* = 3.45).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of students' perception on Commitment to Students

Questionnaire Statements	N	M	SD
Promote the emotional well-being of all learners	87	4.24	.731
Promote social well-being of all learners	87	4.36	.570
Cater for the varied needs of diverse learners including those with special students' needs	87	3.98	.964
Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn	87	4.14	.750
Develop and maintain professional relationships with all learners	87	4.31	.811
Establish a culture of learning through high expectations	87	4.21	.780
Overall		4.21	0.77

As is it is shown in Table 3, the pre-service teachers' responses to the statements related to the effectiveness of the training they received at BTC that would help them to be committed to students were positively very strong (*Mean*= 4.21, *SD*=0.77). However, among the responses to all statements in this section, the students' responses to the statement "Cater for the varied needs of diverse learners including those with special students' needs" received the lowest statistical (Mean=3.98). This indicates that BTC needs to improve its training program for pre-service teachers to better prepare them to handle issues related to students with special needs. The problem here is not the willingness to create an inclusive learning

environment to handle students with special need, yet, it is practical to know how that need must be addressed.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of students' perception on Commitment to Teaching & Learning

Questionnaire Statements	N	Mean	STD
Plan and communicate clear, challenging and achievable expectations for students	87	4.25	.824
Demonstrate expert knowledge of content	87	4.11	.827
Demonstrate expert knowledge of pedagogy	87	4.06	.894
Be able to implement the instructional program based on the needs of the learners	87	4.15	.829
Engage students for learning through appropriate class activities.	87	4.34	.729
Engage students for learning through meaningful assignments	87	4.15	.815
Monitor students' learning and progress using effective assessment criteria	87	4.15	.883
Provide students with constructive feedback	87	4.28	.858
Engage in professional development a	87	4.00	.835
Be accountable for students' attainment and progress	87	4.08	.892
Overall		4.16	0.84

The pre-service teachers strongly agree that the BTC teacher education program provided them with the appropriate training that prepare them to be committed to teaching and learning. It is apparent from Table 4 above, that the students are very consistent in their responses to the statements in this section (Mean=4.16 and SD=0.84) which is considered as an indication that BTC's teacher education program met the requirements of the teacher standards set by MoE regarding teachers' commitment to teaching and learning.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of students' perception on Commitment to Parents

Questionnaire Statements	N	Mean	STD
Communicate effectively with parents about the instructional program	87	3.36	1.201
Involve parents in decision-making about the care and education of their children	87	3.49	1.140
Ensure that all communication with parents are professional and supportive	87	3.51	1.077
Overall		3.45	1.14

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of students' perception on Commitment to School, Community & MoE

Questionnaire Statements	N	Mean	STD
Actively support policies and programs that promote equality for all	87	4.22	.784
Model and teach positive values and encourage learners to apply them	87	4.41	.620
Maintain high standards of ethics and professional conduct	87	4.34	.760
Demonstrate teamwork and professional relationships with colleagues	87	4.26	.869
Engage in planning and implementation of the curriculum	86	4.13	.930
Work in a collaborative and collegial manner	87	4.26	.690
Maintain the highest quality of educational experiences for students	87	4.11	.908
Overall		4.25	0.78

As shown in Table 5 above, this section indicates low agreement of the effectiveness of BTC teacher education program in preparing them to be committed to parents as required by the teacher standards with the overall statistical mean being the lowest (*Mean*=3.45) and the standard deviation being the highest among all sections (*SD*=1.14), Undoubtedly, BTC needs to strengthen its teacher preparation program to train the pre-service teachers to be able to work with parents to provide their children with the appropriate care and education.

5.2. Qualitative Data

In their responses to the open-ended question: "In view of your entire learning experience at BTC including teaching practice, how would you assess the BTC program in preparing you to be an effective teacher?" the pre-service teachers responded positively about the effectiveness of BTC teacher education program. For example, one respondent noted that; "Without this program, I would not be able to teach now in schools." Another pre-service teacher provided similar, but stronger, positive statement about the BTC program stating that "BTC program is unique as it allows you to learn by doing, which we really need right from the beginning to understand the schools' reality." The positive responses continue with another respondent in writing, "Without the preparation I got from BTC, I wouldn't be able to say that I am the teacher I always wished I had." A pre-service teacher summed up his/her response about the program in the following statement "Good and I' m ready for teaching with creative ideas and strategies." In the same line, another pre-service teacher wrote "The program was full of skills and knowledge that gives us the ability to be professional teachers and have the important skills." Another respondent praises the effectiveness of the program by stating, "I learn a lot of strategies which help me to be professional teacher in the future." Similarly, one pre-service teacher points out "It was a very good and strong program that led to having a professional teacher with high qualifications."

While the teaching practice has been seen by many respondents as an important component of BTC program, some concerns have been raised about the way the program is administered. One of the respondents wrote "Simply best of the best, the teaching practices courses were core of the preparation program as candidate teachers practiced what they learned in other courses in terms of theories and strategies." Another argues that the teaching practice should be given more time "I still see that we need to practice more and more in schools." Another student prefers to be left alone with the students in class during the teaching practice experience "students [in schools] put in their minds that we are not efficient to teach them, that is why we cannot enter their classes alone, but always with another teacher."

Although the pre-service teachers overwhelmingly praise the BTC program, some of them pointed out that the program needs improvement in a number of areas. The program's content knowledge was one of these areas. For example, one respondent notes that "I prefer [that the program] provides strong content especially in mathematics and science." Another student pointed out that "BTC is preparing us in a way that we are perfect teachers, but the reality in

schools is different, so now we are facing difficulties in implementing the strategies; we don't know who to follow the school or our learning in BTC." Pre-service teachers also argue that the program needs improvement in preparing them in how to deal with other teachers, parents and MoE officials. One respondent wrote "I will give BTC 8/10, because we didn't have the knowledge in how to deal with parents and our colleagues in school." Another one mentioned that "BTC prepared me 60% to be an effective teacher. Yet, I think I have poor knowledge about working with the school administration and MoE [officials]."

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed that pre-service teachers hold positive views towards the effectiveness of BTC's teacher education program in preparing them to meet the MoE's teacher Standards in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Nevertheless, there are specific important areas in the program that need to be improved. While being mindful that no pre-service teacher program can "impart all knowledge and skills teachers need" [17], the researchers of the current study recommend that BTC is to review and apply changes to its teacher education program in the following areas:

1. Content knowledge: Pre-service teachers who participated in this study raise concerns about the weakness of content knowledge in the BTC program. These concerns were also repeatedly conveyed to the authors of this study during the practicum periods by schools' principles. The program needs to focus more in delivering the content knowledge for the departments of Arabic Language, Science and Mathematics.

2. Dealing with Parents: The teacher education program at BTC should improve in the area of training the pre-service teachers so as to be able to communicate and deal with parents in a professional and respectful manner to enhance the learning environment. The interwoven of the professional aspect with the personal trait is crucial in developing teacher's identity [18]. Therefore, teachers in general, and new teachers in particular, should be trained and equipped with the communication skills needed to know how to deal with parents.

3. Dealing with school administration and MoE officials: To prepare pre-service teachers to be able to understand what expected from them regarding the relationship with the schools' administration, the authors of this study suggest that this matter to be included in the final teaching practice course in Year 4. However, for dealing with MoE, BTC may invite a schools' principles to talk to the pre-service teachers as part of the capstone program and answer the questions related to this matter.

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