Raising the Quality of Education: Developing Professional Standards for Saudi Teachers

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Abstract

the National Center for Assessment in Saudi Arabia is developing a quality standards system to meet present and future needs. This paper discusses the process involving the production of new generic and subject matter standards for teachers. The generic standards include matters such as knowledge of learning, supporting the student's learning pathways, and professional responsibility while the subject matter standards involve 25 different fields. The standards framework will be used for teacher licence examinations, identifying training needs for new teachers, and ensuring quality of teaching programs.

Key words: Professional Standards, Teaching Standards, Teacher License.

Introduction

Many countries have agencies responsible for accreditation of teacher education programs and certification of new teachers and use forums such as the IEAE conferences to inform their teacher education policies guide and accredit teacher education programs (Price, Roth, Shott, & Andrews, 2012). Especially in Saudi Arabia, where the teacher dominated the classroom and rote learning was the norm, a standards framework for teacher training aims to clarify the knowledge, capabilities and values that guide the profession (Shannag, Tairab, Dodeen, & Abdel-Fattah, 2013). Standards aim to clarify the knowledge, capabilities and values that future teachers should gain from their teacher education programs. Standards thereby give teacher education providers clear directions about the opportunities to learn what their programs should provide, without prescribing to how they should prepare teachers. They

make clear to students what they are expected to show what they know and are able to do before they will be eligible to join the teaching profession. This system for teacher education is therefore superior to traditional approaches that focused on course contents and inputs. By focusing on outcomes, the standards system encourages diversity and innovation in teacher education. It also provides a database for researchers studying the relative effectiveness of different approaches to the standards framework (Ingvarson, 2012; MacBeath, 2012).

Saudi Arabia has a commitment to improve the teaching profession by developing professional standards that will sustain and stimulate teachers in their professional practice at different stages of their professional life and support quality learning for all students. Therefore the National Center for Assessment conducted a project funded by the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Public Education Development Project (the "Tatweer" project), which represents a commitment to investing in a quality education system for Saudi Arabia. This paper will describe the processes of developing professional standards for Saudi teachers at two levels; general standards and subject matter standards to be used for constructing examinations for teacher qualifications (licence).

Standards Framework

The process for producing new teacher education quality standards is as follows:

- developing a framework
- developing standards based on the framework
- reviewing and publishing standards

The Standards Framework describes what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. The framework was designed primarily as a procedural guide to forming teacher education standards; however it may later be used for teacher training to upgrade skills and knowledge, or to assist with changes in policy standards or, for example, new standards governing technology use in pedagogy. The standards framework could eventually form a full teacher education system. It comprises three elements: the characteristics of good standards, their form and content.

The literature contains varied notions of teacher education. For example, Dias, Diniz, and Hadjileontiadis (2014) advocate blended learning; Hudson, Hudson, and Adie (2013) explore community-school interaction in enhancing teacher education; and Martin and Loomis (2013) lean towards a constructivist approach to teacher education. However, the standards framework sets a knowledge base for the teaching profession, underpinned by a set

of professional values and a model of good teaching (Marzano & Toth, 2013). The framework reflects the holistic nature of good teaching, integrating the standards in an effective practice.

The framework is laid out in four domains to plot teachers' knowledge and abilities (Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2011):

1. Professional Knowledge: This domain focuses on the knowledge that teachers need to plan for quality student learning opportunities; the discipline/s they teach students and how they learn them; and the curriculum and the resources that will support student learning. Planning for learning includes the knowledge necessary to meet the standards in the other domains.

2. Promoting learning: This describes the practices of effective teachers and the opportunities with which they should be provided for student learning. It focuses on classroom engagement and the learning that teachers promote in their students, as well as the assessment practices to monitor student learning and provide helpful feedback. This domain emphasises that teachers are responsible for promoting learning and the development of curriculum that they are expected to teach.

3. Supporting learning: Effective teachers establish a classroom environment that supports student learning. This domain focuses on an inclusive social environment of trust and respect, and an intellectually challenging environment with high expectations for learning and achievement. As with the previous domain, it focuses on teacher practices.

4. Professional responsibilities: Teachers' professional responsibilities outside the classroom are described here. These responsibilities are to establish a productive relationship with parents, to contribute to effective school functioning, to evaluate their practice and engagement in professional learning, to report on student progress and to fulfill other responsibilities in the school.

The framework contains the scope of the practising teacher's knowledge and skills to promote quality learning for students. Standards for teaching, and thus teacher education curricula, need to be grounded in the society's views of acceptable teacher practices and student outcomes. Standards also need to be supported by evidence that is gained from research (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In developing criteria for teacher evaluation, authors should seek a balance between elements that are generalised and too diffuse for assessment purposes, and being too specific, breaking teaching into a set of competencies and focusing

evaluation narrowly on specific behaviours. The third long-standing issue that the framework addressed is the type of standard. Standards need to contain a general level identifying aspects of knowledge and practice inherent to the profession, and also to address what good teachers know and do in many specialist fields that make up the teaching profession. These specialist fields include many areas such as science and mathematics teachers standards.

Review of standards framework

In the Saudi project, the draft framework was first reviewed by a committee comprising local and international experts. This was supported by wide consultation coming from teaching staff of Saudi universities faculties of education, and finally it was presented in a national forum. All input was considered by the National Assessment Centre's committee and was used to finalise the document.

Producing standards

Several committees were formed to write standards on the various domains. Members of these committees were trained on the structures and parameters inherent to the framework. They set the conditions for teachers' pedagogy, curriculum delivery, and professional responsibilities. The pedagogical standards were meant to be generic to all teachers, the specific standards were developed, as noted, within the scope of the subject and class level. As a set of statements, the committees agreed on the scope of teachers' duties and responsibilities and the principles and quality standards that guided them.

These statements move from principles to more detailed descriptions (table 1).

Table 1
Levels of statements within standards framework

Level	Statement
1 Principles	Guiding vision of quality learning and teachers' work
2 Domains	Organising categories for the teaching standards
3 Standards	Descriptions of teachers knowledge and skills within each domain

4 Elaborations	Elaborations of the standards for particular fields of teaching, used for designing performance assessments and rubrics

Table 1 shows four levels of statements. These are discussed below.

Level 1 Principles Statements at this level are abstract. They are meant to capture the deeper, long-term educational values that teachers pursue. These statements are generic and have no assessment component.

Level 2 Domains These statements define the scope of teachers' work and the main categories within that work.

Level 3 Standards Statements at this level identify the standards in each of Level 2 domains. The standards form the basis for developing assessments. They describe what teachers need to know and be able to do in particular areas of teaching.

Level 4 Elaborations Statements containing elaborations indicate elements of observable, appropriate actions, but do not prescribe specific teaching methods or styles. This allows for variety in pedagogy and evolution within the profession. While these statements do not standardise teaching, they provide the basis for rubrics to be used in assessing teacher performance.

Similar to the levels of generic statements, teaching areas standards move from generalised knowledge and skills to indicators and measurable actions. The generic standards were elaborated in 20 sub-standards as shown in table 2.

Table 2
The framework of teaching standards

Domains of teaching	Standards	Sub-standards
Professional knowledge	1. Knowledge of students and how they learn	4
	2. Mastering basic skills of literacy and numeracy	6
	3. Understanding the central concepts, methods of inquiry, structures of the discipline, and pedagogy specific to the discipline	Elaborated at teaching fields level
	4. Knowledge of general pedagogy	5
	5. Designing coherent learning programs	4

Promoting learning	6. Creating opportunities for, and advancing student learning	5
	7. Assessing student learning and providing useful feedback	5
Supporting learning	8. Establishing a respectful and supportive environment for learning	4
	9. Establishing a culture of learning and high expectations for student achievement	2
Professional responsibility	10. Working productively with school committees and colleagues to improve teaching and learning	3
	11. Continually improving professional knowledge and practice	3
	12. Understanding of the professional duties of Saudi teachers	2

Standard three in the framework was differentiated to reflect each filed of teaching. Standards for teaching each teaching area were guided by the framework and contained:

- factual information in the discipline, its organising concepts, key questions and ideas central to the discipline.

- skills, patterns and processes of reasoning and inquiry for the discipline.

- the historical developments, assumptions and debates for the discipline

- academic language of the discipline, the purpose of the discipline, and the connections between key concepts of the discipline and other disciplines

- how new knowledge is created in the discipline, including forms of creative investigation

- knowledge of key issues and developments in the content area

- relevance of the discipline to wider needs and issues in society

- the habits of mind that typify reasoning, questioning, experimentation and problem-solving in the discipline

- special teaching methods for pedagogical purposes.

Standards for teaching 22 disciplines were developed involving:

- Arabic language, Islamic studies and the English language

- geography, history

- chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics (primary and secondary school), science, computers

- early childhood education

- physical education, art education, and library and information.
- hearing disability, learning difficulties, autism, intellectual disability, and visual disability

Reviewing standards

The first draft of the standards was reviewed by 23 committees, each consisting of three specialists who were also trained on the values, forms and parameters of the framework. The committees reviewed standards according to specific criteria such as: structure and coherence, validity, difficulty, language and clarity, measurability, professional development criteria, meaning that each standard was non-prescriptive and context independent. The second draft was reviewed by the Tatweer groups who funded the project. After this process, the generic standards and 22 specific standards were available for constructing professional teacher assessments.

Publishing standards

All standards are published in two forms: paper and electronic and are readily available for stakeholders such as teachers, designers of academic teaching programs, and educators. The standards are to be revised every five years to accommodate new trends in teaching professionalism and to respond to social inputs.

Summary

The National Centre for Assessment in Saudi Arabia has conducted this assessment project under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, and is funded by the Tatweer Project. The standards consist of two types: generic standards that identify aspects of teachers' knowledge and practice that apply to all teachers, regardless of what or who they teach, and specific standards that focus on fields specialisation in 22 teaching areas. The project has been successful in producing well-accepted professional teacher standards to be used as a basis for constructing teacher licence examinations.

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