# Professional Development Processes of Excellent Teachers and the Manifestations of Their Excellence in Work

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## Abstract

Teachers' professional development has the power to improve teaching quality and student learning, and depends highly in teachers' self-motivation. This qualitative study aim to analyze the professional development processes of excellent teachers and the manifestation of their excellence in work. The paper describes the excellent teachers' professional development processes along four phases in their career: pre-service training, teacher induction, ongoing professional development, and future development. Within each phase of teacher's career, different external and internal factors found to facilitate the development of their excellence. Their professional excellence manifests in four hierarchical levels of influence: the students, the school, the district, and the community. Understanding the professional development processes of excellent teachers can assist to broaden understanding of the factors that facilitate teacher excellence, to promote teacher's growth and teaching quality. It can help decision-makers in identifying teachers who show promise towards excellence and adjust the incentives to promote their excellence.

**Key Words:** professional development; excellent teachers; teachers' characteristics; qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

In our rapidly transforming global society, educational reforms became 'a fact of life' for teachers (Priestley, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). All around the world education systems are constantly changing under the pressures to improve, innovate and supply evidence for higher achievements (Bicaj & Treska, 2014; Day & Smethem, 2009; Fullan, 2011; Luttenberg, Carpay, & Veugelers, 2013; Priestley, 2011). The influence of teacher quality on student achievement has been widely acknowledged (Bash, 1995; Hamzah, Mohamad, & Ghorbani 2008; Pressley & McCormick, 1995). As cited at Chen, Brown, Hattie, and Millward (2012), excellent teaching is the basis for improving teaching and student learning, school effectiveness, teacher evaluation, teacher education programs, and educational reforms implementation.

Thus, it is not surprising that many studies have been conducted addressing questions that dealt with who is an excellent teacher, (Berliner, 2001; Chen, Brown, Hattie, & Millward, 2012; Helm, 2006; Korthagen, 2004; Lowman, 1996; Young, 2009), what characterizes an excellent teacher, (Berlinger, 2004; Chen et al., 2012; Vallance, 2003), how can we evaluate an excellent teacher (Nieto, 2003) and how can we promote teacher's excellence (Ingvarson, 2009). Teachers' professional development processes can be an effective mean for improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Bicaj & Treska, 2014; Chen et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Lieberman & MacE, 2010). Thus, the current research sets out to address not *who* is the excellent teacher but rather what are the professional development processes of excellent teachers and the manifestation of their excellence in work. Analyzing excellent teachers' professional development processes can assist to broaden our understanding of the factors that facilitate teacher excellence and to improve teaching quality.

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## 1.1. Who is an excellent teacher and how his excellence manifests?

An excellent teacher is a construct difficult to evaluate since there are many definitions as to what constitutes teaching excellence (Dwyer & Stufflebeam, 1996; Hilton, Assunção Flores, & Niklasson, 2013; White 1991). In addition, when dealing with teacher's excellence there is a need to address both *teacher quality*, which focus on teachers' characteristics and cognitive resources (knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions), and *teaching quality*, which emphasis classroom practice and student's learning (Kennedy, 2008; Knight et al, 2015). Nevertheless, excellence can also manifest in varied and different ways (Lowma, 1995; 1996; Young, 2009). In the *No Child Left behind Act of 2000*, for example, a highly qualified teacher is measured through formal certification based on a state exam. Paige (2002) evaluates teacher's excellence based on their verbal abilities, content knowledge, and the use of evidence-based instructional strategies (Nieto, 2003).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) regards excellent teachers as teachers who are intelligent, high academic achievers and own excellent verbal skills. They enable students to achieve their greatest potential (Thornton, 2010), but it is intuitively clear that to be an excellent teacher means more than just knowing how to teach (Swartz, 2010). Excellent teachers are driven by ideals, see themselves as educators of values, and have sincere concern for their students' well-being (Vallance 2003; Young 2009). They are characterizes with personal charisma, passion, compassion, egalitarianism, and a sense of humor (Beishuizen, Hof, Van Putten, Bouwmeester, & Asscher, 2001). Wilson and Youngs (2005) suggest a conceptual framework to explain the many definitions for teacher excellence. They suggest that different theories place teacher excellence in one of three types: the educated teacher, the professional teacher, and the idealist teacher. Based on a wide review of the literature, Hattie (2003) has recognized five dimensions that distinguish excellent teachers from other teachers: 1) they teach their subject in a more integrative way. 2) They can facilitate learning through classroom interactions; 3) they can monitor learning and provide feedback; 4) they can attend to affective attributes; and 5) they can influence student outcomes.

However, he mentions that this should not be seen as an inventory list, but rather as an integrative profile of qualities. As cited at Chen et al. (2012), excellent teachers are able and motivated to engage their students in conceptual understating, analytical thinking, and reasoning. This is not to say that teachers are "born" excellent or that formal instructional knowledge is not an important aspect of their professionalism. Indeed, excellent teachers themselves refer to the fact that their professionalism acquired through hard work and gradual development of both knowledge and experience (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Vallance 2003). They gain their expertise and manifest their excellence using formal research, collaborative inquiry and reflection on their personal experience (Grieve, 2010; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Thornton, 2010). Based on the assumption that teacher's excellence can be acquired, countries all over the world focus on a wide systemic reform designed to promote professional development processes and provide financial incentives to teachers who meet the criteria of excellence- high quality performance and knowledge.

## 1.2. Financial incentives to promote teacher excellence

Across the world, countries acknowledge the importance of providing incentives for high quality teachers as well as promoting their professional learning process. In Scotland, the Scottish Chartered Teacher Scheme was formed and designed in 2001 to recognize and reward high quality teachers. This wide national reform consisted of a significant pay increase for teachers who were prepared to complete a Master's degree and meet the criteria for this increase (Ingvarson, 2009). In the U.S., teachers' incentives are usually manifest in the shape of a one-time bonus, based on standardized tests of their students' achievement (Ingvarson, Kleinhenz, & Wikinson, 2008). In England, the reform in the late 1990s provided additional salary levels based on a "performance threshold" assessed within the school (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) and the higher levels of "excellent teacher" and "advanced skills teacher" which included an external assessment process (Training and Development Agency, 2007). In Israel, there has recently been a growing interest in promoting excellent teachers. This is reflected through initiatives such as the "New Horizon" reform that promotes special training programs for teachers who have reached high standards of excellence. In these programs, teachers attend academic courses, initiate educational research, and promote initiatives within their own schools (Ministry of Education, 2013). Another reform, called "Oz Latmura", has initiated financial incentives for teachers based on their students' performance (Ministry of Education, 2014).

As Bicaj and Treska (2014) note, professional development and changes in the system of teachers' salaries have direct impact on teachers' quality, their careers, and their ability to implement educational reform.

### 1.3. Professional development processes to promote teacher excellence

Teachers' professional development is a constant development of knowledge and professional skills throughout one's career in education (Bolam, 2002). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) defined professional development as increasing teachers' understanding of the processes of teaching and learning, and facilitating their understanding of the students whom they teach. Professional development must begin with formal training, and continue throughout the course of teachers' professional service. It is an ongoing process (Bolam, 2002), through which the professional identity of the teacher is been formed, and implicit knowledge becomes explicit; a process of personal and professional empowerment within the realm of one's expertise (Berliner, 2001; Kuijpers, Houtveen, & Wubbels, 2010). Inherent in teachers' work is the need to expand their knowledge, gain greater insight into the teaching and learning processes, develop new teaching methods, and hone their skills, in an effort to improve the functioning and achievements of their students (Chen et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2005).

Professional development can also help teachers to balance between the needs of the school, the individual, and the national (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & McKinney, 2007). The literature suggests different professional development methods to promote both pre-service and in-service teacher's excellence, emphasizing mutual and active learning. Whitty (2008) describes it as a collaborative professionalism, in which teachers work actively together. They may participate in teachers' inquiry groups (Nieto, 2003). They can also attend group discussions about teaching quality (Hilton et al., 2013), training courses, conferences, and seminars to exchange ideas, experiences, and discuss teaching difficulties (Wichadee, 2010). They may participate in a "peer coaching" project to learn from other teachers through observation and mutual feedback (Wichadee, 2010), or in a self-study to promote self-awareness and critical awareness (Ioannidou-Koutselini & Patsalidou, 2015; Moreno, 2015). They need to deal with extensive individual and group reflection to compare actual experience with past experience, examples from other teachers, and personal expectations (Hilton et al., 2013). They should also be supervised by university supervisors to develop reflective capacities, the ability to see classrooms holistically, and to understand broad social and political issues, such as learner differences and classroom cultures (Burbank, Bates, & Gupta, 2016).

The multiplicity of definitions of the concept of 'professional development' indicates that there is a degree of conceptual vagueness surrounding it, resulting in competing- and even conflicting- interpretations (Fraser et al., 2007). It is clear, however, that the processes of professional development take place throughout the teacher's professional life (Hongqin, Steven, & Xing, 2010), and that teachers' learning and development processes are individuals (Burbank et al., 2016). Those processes grounded in teachers' motivation and personal commitment, and affected by their personal perceptions; yet it is also the outcome of an imposed regulation, implemented and authorized by the system (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). To our best knowledge, many researches had previously focused their efforts in trying to defined teacher's excellence instead of examining what have happened in their professional development processes that led them to excellence. As Chen et al. (2012) noted it would be useful to understand how teachers conceive of excellent teaching and how their conceptions relate to teaching practices as a way to inform education reforms, develop advanced teaching standards, and improve teaching and student learning. Therefore, it is important to explore teachers' perceptions of their professional development processes throughout the context of their professional life. This paper explores the professional development processes of the unique population of excellent teachers and the manifestation of their excellence in work.

### 1.4. Research Objectives

While many studies have been conducted about who is an excellent teacher and how to provide incentives for those who meet the criteria, the current study explores the professional development processes of excellent teachers across their career and experience within the school. Thus, the main questions of this research are:

(1) What are the professional development processes of excellent teachers and how do they become excellent?

(2) How does their excellence manifest in their work (what characterizes their work)?

Those questions will be analyzed through the teachers' perspectives from their own professional stories.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Evaluating teacher's excellence is not to be based on formal training or exams but mostly on performance evaluation by their principals, colleagues, and students (Thornton, 2010). Similar to the way participant were chosen in Vallance (2003) study, this study included twelve teachers who were chosen by their own supervisors as excellent teachers, only in the current study participant were chosen by a joint and not self decision, of at least three of their supervisors (school principal, school supervisor and professional supervisor/vice principal). All the teachers were female, teaching in different disciplines: three science teachers, three Hebrew language teachers, three mathematics teachers, two English language teachers, and one Bible teacher. Teachers were at various stages of seniority: four teachers had taught with three to ten years seniority, three teachers with 11-15 years, three teachers with 16-20 years and two teachers with more than 20 years seniority. The teacher's age ranged from 28-52. Table 1 presents a summary of participants' details.

### 3. Table 1: Details of participants

| Interviewee | Age | Academic degree | Other positions in the past | Roles seniority | Teaching Seniority | Type of School | Current Position |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 44 | master's degree | pedagogical coordinator | 11 | 19 | elementary school | class educator + community coordinator |
| 2. | 40 | bachelor's degree | ICT coordinator | 9 | 15 | elementary school | class educator + trip coordinator |
| 3. | 40 | master's degree | coordinator of junior section | 11 | 16 | elementary school | class educator+ vice principle |
| 4. | 46 | bachelor's degree | - | - | 26 | elementary school | professional dance + sports teacher |
| 5. | 42 | master's degree | language coordinator | 10 | 17 | elementary school | class educator + language coordinator |
| 6. | 50 | bachelor's degree | art teacher | 20 | 30 | elementary school | class educator + social coordinator |
| 7. | 34 | bachelor's degree | school's guidance | 10 | 13 | elementary school | class educator + ICT coordinator |
| 8. | 44 | bachelor's degree | - | 12 | 17 | elementary school | art teacher + art coordinator |
| 9. | 35 | bachelor's degree + master's degree studies | - | 8 | 14 | elementary school | class educator + layer coordinator |
| 10. | 50 | bachelor's degree | science coordinator | 19 | 27 | elementary school | science teacher + district supervisor of sciences |
| 11. | 44 | bachelor's degree | - | 20 | 23 | elementary school | class educator + language coordinator |
| 12. | 65 | bachelor's degree | - | 2 | 37 | elementary school | class educator + coordinator of junior section |

### 3.1. Research instrument

This study conducted using a semi-structured interview in which the teacher tells the story of her professional development from her own perspective (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). The interview dealing with professional development included diverse questions referring to her perception of excellence in education, her own professional development process and highlights in her career (such as, How would you define an excellent teacher?

What makes teacher an excellent one? In what areas teacher's excellence is manifest? What / who helps teacher to become excellent? What has encouraged your professional excellence? What are the turning points in your career? Tell the story of your professional development. Where does your excellence "located" in the sequence of your professional development?). Each interview took approximately 1.5 hours and took place in a location chosen by the teacher (the school, the teacher's home or a neutral setting). Full confidentiality was guaranteed. All the teachers who were chosen agreed to participate voluntarily.

All interviews originally conducted and documented in Hebrew and then translated into English by an English nattive, keeping both content and meaning identical. Ethical approval for the study obtained from the Ethics Committee for Academic Studies, and all participants provided written informed consent.

## 3.2. Data analysis

The method for analyzing the data was based on the approach of Kvale (1996; 2002), which provided a method for the systematic categorization of the findings. Following Kvale's approach, analysis of the interviews was comprised of several stages: creating a condensed version of the original story, identifying categories in the story, and defining significant patterns that repeat themselves throughout the stories. The study conducted using grounded theory, according to which the theoretical model is constructed gradually, grounded in the collected data and their subsequent interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

In the first step of the "open coding" of the interview, I found that the excellent teachers referred to distinct phases in their career: pre-service training, teacher induction, ongoing professional development and future professional development. This step constitutes the major categories for analysis (Riessman, 1993). In the second step of "axial coding", in each professional development phase, the characteristics that contributed to each phase were identified. To organize the data, the characteristics were divided into internal factors and external characteristics. The internal characteristics are related to feelings, attitudes and the abilities of the excellent teachers. The external characteristics are related to processes in the organizational environment in which the excellent teachers work.  At the third step of the "selective coding", the four levels at which the teachers' excellence is reflected were identified: student level, school level, district level and community level. In accordance with Strauss' (1987) recommendations, the categories that were found by the researcher were peer reviewed by two other experts from the field of the professional development of teachers. Each expert reviewed the data from the interviews and data analysis into categories. Then the researcher and the two experts sat together to discuss disagreements and questions that have been raised to ensure trustworthiness of the analyzed data. Based on this process, the categories were modified into their final version. To ensure full Anonymity and confidentiality, the interviews coded to numbers presentation in the results section.

## 4.   Results

The aim of this qualitative study was to analyze professional development processes of excellent teachers and the ways their excellence manifests in their work. Analyzing the data, it was found that excellent teachers perceive their professional development in four distinct phases: pre-service training, teacher induction, ongoing professional development, and future professional development. For each stage in their professional development, they perceive different internal and external characteristics that contribute to their excellence. The result sections will describe each phase in their professional development and its characteristics. It will continue with the description of the four levels in which the teachers' excellences found to manifest: student level, school level, district level and community level.

## 4.1. Professional development processes

Below are the four phases that were identified in the teachers' professional development and their internal and external characteristics.

### 4.1.1.    Pre-service training

*Internal characteristics:* The teachers' stories show that even in the early stages of pre-service, the excellent teachers were driven by a sense of mission to the education profession. This sense of mission was a part of their high motivation and future aspirations. The teachers' stories suggest a strong relationship among these characteristics - most probably the building stones for their route to excellence:

I chose to begin my work in this school (experimental school) out of my educational belief, initiative and a dream to create a new pedagogy with the staff of teachers and the parents of the students. From the beginning, I knew that my aspiration was towards excellence (Interviewee 2).

I can't be moderate, it is in my nature. Back to my school days, I always had to get the maximum grades and I strove for excellence. In college, I got certificate of excellence, and even in my master's degree studies. Everything I do, I do to make it perfect and not just to mark as 'done' (Interviewee 9).

*External characteristics*: Surprisingly, in the first stage of pre-service training, there was usually no reference to external characteristics since the teachers were not yet employees in the school system. The teachers' internal characteristics, described earlier, are likely to influence the teachers' adjustment to the school, the education profession and their future development. As will be described further on, once the teacher enters the school system, an interaction between the personal characteristics of the teacher and the external characteristics of the school system begins. Although, evidence from one Interviewee suggests external characteristic back in her fieldwork days, as a student, this can actually be seen an acknowledgment of her internal characteristics so external reinforcement manifested mainly in the next stage of her professional development when she started her job there:

When I was a last year student experiencing fieldwork with another student in the school, we started to wonder about next year employment there. The school's management said she has only one position for next year and she wanted to hire me. I guess I proved something else, my skills were better. I received a certificate of academic excellence at college. This reinforced me. It gave me an excellent starting point, in a place where people already know me and know what I am capable of, and on the other hand it came with higher expectations. I had to prove that my work is something special, excellent, so I will not disappoint those whom chosen and fought over me (Interviewee 9).

### 4.1.2.    *Teacher induction*

*Internal characteristics:* Many teachers indicate their career beginning as a very significant point, from which they also started to develop themselves professionally (when asked to describe their professional development process that led to their excellence, all addressed their first years after graduation as beginners' teachers and forth):

A young-new teacher figures out whether the teaching profession suits him, whether he enjoys his work. This is an initial phase of self-examination and getting familiar with the system, and only over the years, the teacher (starts to) recognize his personal qualities and develop further (Interviewee 5). They highlight knowledge gained from experience over technical knowledge acquired during their academic studies:

I know how to teach and it seems to me like something that can be easily learned with good guidance, or textbooks. However, the part of the personal relationship with parents and children cannot be (formally) instructed. You acquire it slowly and learn from situations (Interviewee 9). With their initial entrance into the education profession, the teachers demonstrate high standards of responsibility and commitment to the profession. They were characterized with innovative thinking that enabled them to initiate changes and pursue ongoing development on both personal and organizational levels:

The first year or two were very challenging as far as dealing with students, parents and the educational system. During the first years, I continued to improve my lesson plans (the examples discussed in class, the way I deliver content...). I trained a lot and gave private lessons for children in the afternoon to enrich my content world (interviewee 8).

I was one of the "early birds" who taught technology… now I am a teacher of science and technology and also a social coordinator and a coordinator for safety practices (interviewee 6).

I have initiated many moves to promote teaching in my discipline beginning with physical changes and re-building (the library), and initiating a program to enhance reading for all elementary and middle schools students (interviewee 5).

I believe that only by knowing the child's natural environment and his capabilities, I would find ways to reach and promote him. That is the reason way I visit in each child's home at the beginning of year. I know both parents, their occupations, and I am not ashamed to ask about their financial situation if necessary. I am learning to recognize the location of the child between his brothers, his relationship with the parents and the parent's attitude toward him. If necessary, I activate additional factors for help (the school counselor, a social worker, recruiting clothes or furniture)... I am very strict with "love one another" and this is the based for all of my work- respect and love one another. I always made sure there is respect for the teacher as well. The children receive me in class standing, and if the principal enters the class, they stand up to honor her. My classroom is quiet, not because I am yelling, but from the children understanding of the need to respect each other. I provide an attentive ear for parents and truly believe in the connection with the house.

I am sending a message of shared burden for the child education to the parents and I am always ready to support, help and illuminate if necessary. I educate parents to be active in all kinds of ways. I invites them to class at the end of the school day (especially those who say they do not know how to help) and I give them parental guidance, tools and tips how to help the child at home. I stay at the end of each school day without limits of time until parents realize that they are able to help and need to assist (interviewee 12).

*External characteristics:* Each of the teachers who participated in this research has initiated unique projects in her school, which attributed to her innovative thinking, sense of leadership and achievement. However, it is also evident that the success of the excellent teacher in her early stages of development is greatly dependent on the external characteristics of the school organization in which she works. First and foremost, the school management must recognize the professional potential and allow these teachers opportunities to experiment in leading roles. By doing so, the school system enhances the teacher's sense of achievement and promotes further initiatives:

From the beginning of my road, I constantly received credit. I think that without being reinforced and getting positive feedbacks from the start I would not continue (to be excellent). My previous principal know how to lift me, the students strengthen me to continue and the parents gave me endless compliments. Families I knew and taught their eldest's, pre insisted and asked for me as a first grade teacher for their youngest. It warms my heart (interviewee 11).

The principal has opened the door for my work, dreams and personal initiatives and I owe her my gratitude for this until today. This principal also knew how to navigate my professional development… she really trusted me, offered me administrative positions and made me feel that I could bring a fresh spirit to the school. She knew how to take advantage of my motivation and empowered me (interviewee 1)

When a teacher gets recognition for her excellence, it gives you the power to proceed; it is like another branch is growing and you realize someone appreciates your work… being more involved in the decisions and work in school, initiating new ideas, being open-minded and not just doing your job and going home. You can't be excellent and be narrow-minded. Most likely, if the principal thinks you are an excellent teacher, you will get more roles coordinating and projects running because they trust you and believe in your ability to influence others beyond the class level (interviewee 9).

Nevertheless, despite teacher's recognition of both internal and external characteristics that facilitate their excellent, the teachers emphasized internal characteristics as the most vital element for teacher's excellence: Environment can encourage excellence, but I believe with all my heart that internal motivation is a major coefficient for excellence teachers (Interviewee 3).

However, they mentioned conditions in which teachers with potential for excellent do not get suit external support and conditions to perform and as a result wear out and even drops out of the system: I think that the education system does not sufficiently support teachers and therefore there are teachers who are in a constant wear out (condition). I know excellent teachers, but unfortunately, they are not rewarding (accordingly) (Interviewee 6).

### 4.1.3.  Ongoing professional development

*Internal characteristics.* The teachers' ongoing professional development was characterized by their aspiration for constant learning. They did not perceive their role as static and perceived their professional development as a lifelong learning. They aspire to continually develop and improve themselves professionally.

I have a strong desire to succeed in me, so I was very good from the start and constantly invested to succeed (interviewee 11).

I have not reached the peak of my development yet. I want to continue my learning and gain more experience. I have always wanted to develop professionally and to broaden my education and curiosity as much as possible. I want to get up every morning knowing that I am doing something new (interviewee 8).

This is where I have arrived and from this point I need to aspire toward further growth. I will never stop going to courses and learning new things. My children laugh at me that they will finish school and I'll still be learning. I see that as development and growth (interviewee 10).

When I received the 'Education Award', I had to think how I continue to contribute to and improve for the sake of the school and to show that the award is justified. I did not want the award to make me feel I do not have anything to aspire. I always set up personal goals and leave light at the end of the tunnel to inspire and reach (interviewee 6).

After five years at work, I realized that changes and experiences in varied teaching circles would preserve my joy of creation at work (interviewee 3).

Interestingly, although at this stage the teachers have already accumulated experience in their job and were recognized by their external environment as excellent (received different rewards for excellence in teaching, were recommended for 'the Teacher of the state' competition, received different promotion options, and received great appreciation from the students, their parents, and their supervisors), they did not refer to their excellence as a 'done deal', and some even mentioned they are not yet excellent enough:

I am still aspiring for excellence... I have not contributed anything I can contribute (yet) (Interviewee 6). There was no one single time-point, when I suddenly felt excellent. Excellence is a multi-year process. It has been built and continues to be built. I also have some areas that still require improvement, and I hope things will improve later (Interviewee 5).

As part of their willingness to continue learning, they tend to reflect on the processes they undergo. Using reflection, they were able to both appreciate their abilities and learn from their mistakes at the same time: Action is not merely doing something but it is also to think, ponder, and create time for learning, feedback and planning (Interviewee 10).

From year to year, you improve, learn from your mistakes and change accordingly... to receive criticism and rebuild yourself from it, meaning i.e., to keep moving forward and learn from mistakes (Interviewee 2). As excellent teachers, they receive leadership positions roles in the school, which can be stressful and challenging. However, these teachers remarkably have high ability of coping in the face of challenges. They see challenge as leverage for further development; they do not back down and find their strength from their belief in their way and their aspiration to succeed:

As I was saying, you have to have a strong will in order to take risks and do something new, believe in what you do and love it and, of course, never back down because along the way you will experience many difficulties and sometimes you will just want to throw it all out and say what do I need this for? (Interviewee 4).

There are no axioms; you just have to follow your inner voice even if people around do not always agree with your feelings and opinions (Interviewee 3).

*External characteristics.* After acquiring experience and in their on-going stages of development, it seems that the motivation for action relies more on their internal characteristics rather than the external ones. These teachers have already been recognized for their abilities and have received roles inside the school, yet they are driven by their idealism for further development. It is of value that the school system enables professional development. The school system has a significant role in allowing these teachers the opportunity to continue to learn and develop professionally:

I still do not think that I defined as excellent; I know that I am good and I have my qualities, perhaps my principal's recommendation that I should participate in administrative course is some external recognition for being on the right track (interviewee 10).

The group of teachers with whom I take the course enables me to learn from colleagues, share, initiate and constantly develop (Interviewee 7). Over the years of being a coordinator, I have participated in seminars on the topic which contributes significantly to my knowledge and opens new worlds for me… in the course I have learned so much about the education system, who is an open-minded teacher and how to lead changes. The course has contributed to my professionalism. I now think in a more systemic fashion, as a leader and as a principal (Interviewee 5).

What also helps the teacher to become excellent is a similar community that pulls him up, community of people acting in the same spirit and directions (Interviewee 1). My professionalism has emerged from time to time following the learning and today I am still learning with pleasure. I am participating in social coordinator advanced studies and studying for a master's degree in special education because it is very interesting to me and I feel a need to (Interviewee 6).

### 4.1.4. Future professional development

Analyzing the teachers' professional stories shows that even though they have been recognized as reaching professional excellence, these teachers constantly think about their future development. It is assumed that their future aspirations are based on previous success and recognition but also serve as a catalyst for further motivation to develop:

I still don't feel I am an excellent teacher… I still think in terms of challenge and personal satisfaction and not in terms of excellence. I do not know what the future holds for me. If I receive the opportunity to run a school, I will most likely consider it positively (Interviewee 3). My excellence is not a one single point over my professional development time sequence. Excellence is composed of innate personality characteristics and skills acquired over the years (interviewee 5).

Thinking about the future, I think of leadership roles, such as supervisor or being a part of a writing team of educational programs. I also plan to finish the M.A I started this year and initiate a project that helps students to experience meaningful learning (Interviewee 8).

In this phase of the teachers' professional development, it is not possible to distinguish between internal and external characteristics since it reflects the teachers' internal thoughts. This process can be attributed to their internal characteristics.

In sum, teachers expressed internal inspiration and motivation for excellence through all phases of professional development but also express the need for external evaluation to promote teacher's excellence:

The system is not really rewarding excellent teachers. There is no change in the salaries and benefits for teachers who invest more and it is a shame because good teachers will do their work faithfully without any incentives, but you might want to give them a sense of recognition in their actions, and perhaps that would also attract others (teachers) up (interviewee 10).

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics for each phase in the teachers' professional development.

**Table 2: Phases of professional development and its characteristics**

|  | Pre-service training | Teacher induction | Ongoing professional development | Future professional development |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Internal characteristics | (1) sense of mission to the profession of education<br>(2) high motivation<br>(3) future aspirations | (1)responsibility and commitment to the profession<br>(2) innovative thinking | (1)aspiration to constant learning<br>(2) reflecton the processes they undergo<br>(3) coping in the face of challenges | (1) thinking about future development |
| External characteristics |  | (1) recognize the professional potential<br>(2) experiment in leading roles | (1)enables professional development |  |

## 4.2. Manifestations of teachers' excellence

Analyzing the data, the teachers' professional development processes demonstrate the way in which their professional excellence manifests in their professional work. The teachers' excellence was found to manifest in four hierarchical levels of influence: student, school, and district and community level.

### 4.2.1. The student level

The excellent teacher has acquired the ability to lead changes at the student-class level. She works towards assisting every student reach his full potential. Her own aspiration for professional excellence is a role model for the students themselves.

Moreover, the excellent teacher encourages student excellence by providing challenges and developing curiosity for learning. Developing personal excellence does not mean merely encouraging high academic achievement but also includes instilling values and making a personal acquaintance with the students.

I always try meeting the needs of students and change my methods of teaching to their needs. I try to find what works for every individual student. (Interviewee 10). Each child is a pure soul, and we need to know how to touch his soul. There is no child that cannot create; I aim to bring each child to the maximum fulfillment of his abilities. There is a need to show empathy and tolerance toward the diversity among children (Interviewee 8).

I try to create a supportive classroom environment for the children, to create a good basis for openness and raise their self-esteem (Interviewee 2). The mantra of not giving up on myself and of course never giving up on my students, always give them the feeling that I believe in them and all they need to do is to bring their abilities to the surface manages to surprise me as well and strengthen the feeling that the effort was worthwhile (Interviewee 3). I used to open every morning in class with emotional ventilation, encouraging the children to share their experiences. It was very important to me to create a supportive listening classroom atmosphere where the children could raise problems from their daily life and together find solutions. When a child has a feeling that he is wanted and loved and the atmosphere in class is relaxed and calm, the children will grow up to be better citizens because they developed self-awareness, managing and expressing emotions (abilities), taking the other into account, cooperation and other social skills and tools for mental and emotional strength (Interviewee 12).

### 4.2.2. The school level

The excellent teacher also shows a high commitment to the school itself, beyond the class level. She sees her work as affecting the school level and hopefully promoting it into a better place. This system-wide vision encourages her to lead school projects and work towards change in educational perception:

I coordinate the subject of language teaching, working with class educators, language teachers and with external supervisors in accordance with the goals of the Ministry of Education. I lead changes in teachers' perceptions, the academic environment, textbooks, the school library, implementing ICT and more.

I think many projects and suggestions that come to the school go through me for consultation, maybe because of my personal traits. I am happy to be in a position in which my opinion can be heard and influence the projects that the school picks up (Interviewee 11).

An excellent teacher has a place of pedagogical honor in the teacher's room. The other teachers respect him and address him for a consult. They know they can trust him regarding the educational practice (Interviewee 1).

The schools' teaching staff encouraged me, and gave me a sense of belonging and giving. We do not have a state of envy or 'putting feet' we really are a supportive team (Interviewee 6).

### 4.2.3. The district level

Excellent teachers go beyond the school level and hold positions of influence in the district level. They serve as instructors and organize projects on the district level. The positions they hold enable them to lead change processes on the district level.

The excellent teacher has wide connections to teaching staff outside the school as part joint seminars and mutual learning settings. An excellent teacher has social network that is wide enough for development-donor and donated. Reciprocity in this relationship is important (Interviewee 1).

I have lead the district to create a yearly event called the dancing school in which children from all over the city come to the stadium to dance and I teach them the moves (Interviewee 5).

### 4.2.4. The community level

Excellent teachers see their educator role as an influential position in the interaction between the school and the community in which it exists. Thus, they contribute to leading community projects, which enable the promotion of educational processes in the community. As educators, they also see themselves holding the responsibility for educating the future generation of citizens in the community.

An excellent teacher is a teacher that systematically and continuously maintains a constant dialogue with the community of parents, think together with them, meet to update and keep up to date, very familiar with the children and know how to facilitate  partnership with the parents for the benefit of the children (Interviewee 1).

I had to facilitate the communication among the parents in the school- from different cultural and socio-economical settings… I took a community coordinator course and in this current year already initiated a school community day, which was very successful (Interviewee 8).

I used existing community institutions such as the Zoological Gardens, the science center, and the agricultural farm, and make connections between them and the educational institutions (Interviewee 10). My students are the representatives of society in general- what I teach them they take with them to their homes. I teach problem solving and mediation and I hope that they take some of it to apply at home also (Interviewee 9).

Indeed, the excellent teacher influences all four levels, and does not act locally:

The feeling that you are transferring something from you, even a kind word, a hug, a proposal succeeded, a tip, a lecture, knowledge, willingness to help to the environment, to someone, to a group, class or school, (even) one of those is important as many (Interviewee 1).

## 5.    Discussion

The current study aims to expend results from Vallance (2003) study, regarding central issues of teacher's excellence, and to analyze professional development processes of excellent teachers. This is of importance since teacher excellence is of great value to the educational system, as mentioned in Nieto (2003):

The experiences and lives of excellent teachers can help all of us—teachers, teacher educators, parents, and citizens in general—rethink some of our assumptions about teaching in the most depressed schools and, in effect, about the future of public education. They also help challenge rigid notions of what makes for a "highly qualified teacher".

Thus, by identifying the professional development processes of excellent teachers, we can evaluate teacher who show potential toward excellence from their pre-service training i.e. internal factors) and facilitate their development towards professional excellence (i.e. external factors). Teachers in Vallance (2003) study listed four main characteristics of excellent teachers: being organized and in control of 'what should be done'; holistic understanding of each student's needs; love and commitment for the students. The current study further identifies different factors of teacher's excellence along the continuum of their professional development and within different levels of influence. This is of importance for principals and decision-makers to adjust the incentives for teachers based on their specific needs at each stage of their career (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

### 5.1. Relating to their future professional development

Many teachers indicate their career beginning as a very significant point, from which they started to develop themselves professionally, and referred narrowly to their pre-service training. In all phases, they highlight knowledge gained from experience and during their in-service stages over technical knowledge acquired during their academic studies. In Vallance (2003) study teachers also emphasized the importance of their own accumulated experience over technical knowledge, suggesting that teachers consider technical elements as an important base, but believe far more things are needed to reach excellence teaching.

Respectively, it is interesting to see that while teachers were directed to tell their professional development story, i.e., their past and present experiences; all the teachers described their thoughts and hopes for their future. This is an important finding since usually teachers tend to focus on their ongoing challenges and constraints and find it difficult reflect on their professional aspirations and future development (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007).

Thus, it seems that excellent teachers are characterized as those who can deal with these important aspects of their professional development, set up future professional development goals and constantly inspire to learn and develop professionally. A similar finding was found among teachers who experienced high levels of empowerment referred to as 'change enhancing empowerment' (Avidov-Ungar, Fridman & Olshtain., 2014). It is likely to assume that teachers who were chosen by their superiors as excellent teachers experience high levels of empowerment, explaining the similar results found in these two samples.

## 5.2. The move toward internal factors

Analyzing teachers' professional development processes reveals that at different phases of their career, the teachers perceive different internal and external characteristics that contributed to their professional excellence. They express internal inspiration and motivation for excellence through all phases of professional development but also express the need for external evaluation to promote teacher's excellence.

*Internal characteristics*: even from their early stages of pre-service, the excellent teachers were driven by a sense of mission to the education profession. With their initial entrance into the education profession, the teachers demonstrate high standards of responsibility and commitment, and their internal characteristics most influence their initial adjustment to the school, the education profession, and their future development. The teachers did not perceive their role as static, and expressed constant aspiration for learning. They aspire to continually develop and improve themselves professionally, and see challenge as an opportunity for further development. They strength lies in strong self-belief in their way and their aspiration to succeed. Those results are similar to the results found in Vallance (2003) study, in which teachers expressed modesty, acknowledged their own limitations, felt fully associated with their profession, did not consider themselves above their colleagues, were characterized by idealism and aspired for holistic results that goes beyond a narrow understanding of subject issues among their students. Most of them entered the profession immediately after graduation and expressed a strong desire for doing good that attracted them to the teaching profession in the first place (Vallance, 2003)

*External characteristics:* the success of the excellent teacher in her early stages of development is greatly dependent on the external characteristics of the school organization in which she works. The school system has a significant role allowing these teachers the opportunity to continue to learn and develop professionally, and the school management should recognize the professional potential and allow these teachers opportunities to experiment in leading roles. External feedback also found to support and nourish their high self-motivation and sense of empowerment, but even working within difficult and un-sufficient external support reality, their internal motivation kept them going. Teachers in Vallance (2003) study also noted lack of adequate rewards, but kept a positive vision in light of all the difficulties and challenges they have faced. Their positive perception of education did not based solo on salary, conditions or promotion; rather grounded in a strong sense of commitment, empowerment and personal influence. They expressed a strong belief in their ability to create positive impact. Thus, the combination of both external and internal characteristics is vital for excellence development. Once teachers enter the school system, an interaction between their personal characteristics and the external characteristics of the school system begins. After acquiring experience and in their on-going stages of development, it seems that the motivation for action relies more on internal characteristics rather than the external ones, and although those teachers already recognized for their excellence, they were driven by their idealism for further development. Looking at both internal and external factors along the teachers' professional development, it is clear to see that in the early stages of their career, they regard external factors as highly important. Their development seems to influence the ability of the managerial staff to recognize their potential, encourage them and offer challenging positions in which they can grow and develop professionally. If this process is encouraged, then further along their career, they are no longer dependent on the educational system: they lead changes in school and aspire to constant learning. Their motivation is internal and all they require is a system that can allow the process of growth and learning. This process implies the significance of fostering professional development in the early stages of their career (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994).

## 5.3. Broadening the circles of influence

As opposed to Vallance (2003) study, in which teachers were more focused on the holistic view of each student, in the current study the teachers' excellence was found to be manifested in four hierarchical levels of influence: the student, school, and district and community level. The excellent teacher works towards assisting every student to reach his full potential and instilling values, while at the same time she leads school projects, and shows a high commitment to the school itself, beyond the local class level. Her excellence goes even beyond the school level as she holds positions of influence in the district level and leads district levels' changes. She leads community projects, which enable the promotion of educational processes in the community, and see her responsible for educating the future generation of citizens in the community.

If we look at the way excellent teachers manifest themselves in their work, it is clear that in their early stages of development, they tend to focus on the student/class level. However, as they move toward professional excellence, they broaden their circles of influence to the school, the district and even the community levels. This process is in line with the theoretical perception of excellent teachers as those who think of the profession in an idealistic way and aspire to outcomes that are beyond the narrow interpretation of their profession (Farris-Berg, 2014; Vallance, 2003).

## 5.4. Research application, limitations and future research

The current study broadens understanding of the factors that facilitate teacher excellence, and promote teacher's growth and teaching quality within different professional development phases. It can help decision-makers in identifying teachers who show promise towards excellence, support their further development and active role perception, and adjust the incentives to promote their excellence. Nevertheless, this study was based on the qualitative approach, thus focusing on a limited sample of teachers. Future research should consider the impact of demographic variables such as gender, culture and school characteristics on the model. Moreover, the analysis is based on the teachers' retrospective and reflective thinking of their professional development. Thus, it would be of value for further research to focus on longitudinal studies of teachers, dating back to their pre-service training, making use of both qualitative and quantitative data. This would eliminate some of the biases of retrospective analysis and enable to study more carefully the specific processes within each developmental stage.

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