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'Not fully coordinated': the loosely coupled paradigm as a framework for understanding relationships of educators in teacher education programmes

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programmes have undergone a shift over the past decade, from traditional programmes that focused on the academic arena (university or college) towards more placement-based ones located in the field (school). Based on the loosely coupled paradigm, the present study examined the characteristics of the various relationships built between educators in the two arenas and how these relationships shape teacher education programmes in Israel, focusing on the preparation period of pre-service teachers. Forty-five educators (teacher educators; mentor teachers; programme heads) were interviewed. Using thematic analysis, two themes regarding relationships were found: who forms the relationship and what its purpose is; and the nature of the relationship. Two additional themes emerged regarding the relationship which shaped the teacher education programme: a highly bureaucratic profile; and procedures dependent on personal relationships. The study shed light on the implementation of a school-based experience (practicum) for pre-service teachers that is based on academia-field partnership. Using loosely coupled paradigms in accordance with the findings, it seems that bureaucratic procedures tend to increase at the expense of pedagogical aspects, as demonstrated by the educators involved in the teacher education programmes.

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Introduction

Teacher education programmes for pre-service teachers have undergone many changes in recent years, chiefly with the aim of enhancing effective practices and preventing the dropout of new teachers in the first five years following their entry into schools (Brok, Wubbels, and Van Tartwijk 2017; Wilcoxon, Steiner, and Bell 2022). A major change in teacher education programmes is reflected in the growing collaboration between academia (college or university) and the field (school). While, in the past, the attitude towards the education and the training of future teachers was dichotomous – where academia was more responsible for education through theory-based knowledge, and schools were

considered as places to gain experience focused on practical knowledge based on training – more recently, the partnership between the institutions has intensified (Ingersoll and Strong 2011).

As a result of this partnership, educators from both institutions collaborate to integrate theory and practical knowledge. Thus, the relationships between the various educators have become key to the success of the teacher education process. The relationships between the different educators can be examined by the theoretical perspective of a loosely coupled paradigm, which has emerged from the organisational field (Arango-Vasquez and Gentilin 2021) and loosely coupled ideas have been studied and implemented in educational settings, such as schools (Sergiovanni 1995), colleges and universities (Schubert and Yang 2016) and in processes such as educational reforms (Rinehart Kathawalla and Mehta 2022).

The current study was based on pre-service teachers' school-based experience (practicum) that is usually conducted in the third year of preparation, while they are still at college, and not yet fully integrated as active teachers in schools. The aim of the present study – focused on teacher education programmes in Israel – was to examine the characteristics of the various relationships that are structured between educators in the two arenas – academia and the field – and how these relationships shape the teacher education programmes.

Theoretical framework

The loosely coupled paradigm in education systems

In recent decades, the school has been defined as a loosely coupled organisation (Weick 1976). According to Weick, 'loose coupling' means that 'events are attached to each other to some degree; however, each event retains its own identity'. This implies that decisions, actions, and plans are only loosely connected to each other. The nature of education systems as loosely coupled has been extensively debated in the literature (Goodrum et al. 2022; Montecinos et al. 2022; Shen, Gao, and Xia 2017).

Following the notion of the loosely coupled paradigm in schools, the autonomy of educators can be seen equally as an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, teacher autonomy, as demonstrated by loose coupling, has a strong connection with job satisfaction and commitment to work (Hökkä and Vähäsantanen 2014; Paino 2018; Pang 2004) and enables professional orientation and professionalism (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen 2018). On the other hand, professional autonomy and strong professional agency may act as counterforces for educational transformation (Gamoran 2008; Hökkä and Vähäsantanen 2014). Strong bureaucratic control is thus often needed in order to overcome the deficits of the loose coupling (Cheng 2008).

The metaphor of the loosely coupled connections can be further theoretically supported by the *community of practice* ideas as developed by Wegner (Wegner, McDermott, and Snyder 2002) and highlight how individuals in an organisation become informally bound by the value they find in learning together. Thus, community of practice can connect people from different organisations or independent units that are also located in different places. The connections can be enhanced by core knowledge requirements and encouraged by valuing people's learning, making time and resources available and removing barriers.

The path to establishing these connections can be demonstrated by the role of the teacher educators who represent the academic institution where they work and belong, and also the school as a field where they share their expertise and knowledge with the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher. Coupling the two institutions – academia and school – can thus be achieved by embracing the notion of teacher educators as brokers or boundary spanners. Past studies were focused on teacher educators as *brokers*, emphasising their key role in the partnership and the bonding between the institutions (Montecinos, Walker, and Maldonado 2015). Yet, while they need to act with agency, they are not accountable all by themselves for the ties. Their ‘individual efforts should be supported by the institutions involved as well as by policy’ (Cloonan, Paatsch, and Hutchison 2022).

Teachers can also serve as boundary spanners by connecting knowledge experience and opportunities for access (Anderson et al. 2022). *Boundary spanning* is used as a theoretical and methodological framework to explore how educators may facilitate the local school system to become a more tightly-coupled system and strengthen the capacity of the organisation for the benefit of school improvement. For example, superintendents can tighten the couplings between different hierarchical levels in the school system by performing instructional leadership and by participating in managerial and policy decisions in school (Ståhlkrantz and Rapp 2020). A similar direction was found among boundary spanners in higher education (Klein 2017).

Following the theoretical concepts of loose coupling, brokers, boundary spanning and community of knowledge, the structure of the relationships can be seen in the educators who hold different roles in teacher education programmes for pre-service teachers, which combine the field (school) and academia (college or university).

The academia – field relationship

Partnerships between academia and the field in teacher education have become highly valuable (Straub and Ehmke 2021; White, Timmermans, and Dickerson 2022). There are various models of partnerships between academic institutions which train teachers and schools in the field (Ingersoll, Merrill, and May 2014). Research shows that the positive impact of pre-service teachers’ mentoring programmes affects several educators, including the new teacher’s commitment to the system, teacher retention, the new teacher’s eventual integration into the classroom, and pre-service teachers’ achievements (Ingersoll, Merrill, and May 2014). Moreover, studies have shown the positive impact on novice teachers as future teachers, after participating in teacher education programmes that have an effective academia-field partnership (Ingersoll and Strong 2011).

Yet, alongside the benefits of the partnership, challenges and constraints should be noted. As recently published (Beshir, Dagnaw Kelkay, and Melesse 2023), practicum actors need to develop ‘shared understandings and closer perceptions about the purposes of practicum and its assumptions’ (17). As their perceptions were lower than expected, ‘they have to jointly work among each other and thereby strengthen the college-school links’ (17). An additional international comparative study emphasised complexity arising among mentor teachers as agents of change who need to ‘operate within complex fields of interaction at multiple policy, professional, personal, and interpersonal levels’ (Orland-Barak 2023, 142). The academia-field partnership is, on the one hand, worthwhile and

value-adding but, on the other hand, is also challenging and complicated. In the past few years, Israel's Education Ministry has encouraged academic institutions to develop ties with the field as part of their teacher education programmes.

Teacher education programmes in Israel

Specifically, the present study was conducted in the Israeli school system which serves approximately 1.95 million pupils in Grades 1–12, attending nearly 5,400 elementary, middle, and high schools (Israeli Ministry of Education 2022). Israeli pre-service teachers attend higher education institutions, including both colleges of education and universities, with the majority graduating from colleges of education. Teacher education in Israel is governed by both the Ministry of Education and The Council for Higher Education. The former is responsible for ensuring adequate training for teaching and the latter for approving academic qualification programmes and degrees.

In recent decades, academisation has been encouraged, requiring the integration of academic content into teacher education curricula. Recently, influenced by global trends, there has also been a strong movement towards synergies and meaningful links between pre-service teacher learning at their academic institutions and the school-based experience (practicum) (Maskit and Orland-Barak 2015). Thus, models have been developed which broaden the academia-field partnership. In the partnership model, the schools, partly through the mentoring they provide in the field, are establishing the practicum as a central component in the teacher education process (Orland-Barak and Wang 2020). This was first seen in the Professional Development School model (PDS), which positioned schools as the locations where experiential efforts take place, and thus, acquiring a central role in teacher education (Martin and Mulvihill 2020).

Over the past decade, a new model has evolved in Israel, based on the PDS and part of the Partnership model: the Academy-Classroom model. Considered as their practicum, third-year pre-service teachers join experienced mentoring teachers, actively teach with them, and thus acquire the experience they need. The partnership between academia and the field is also strengthened through co-teaching in the classes of the mentor teachers as well as through the pre-service teachers' involvement in other classroom and school activities (Assadi and Murad 2017; Nissim and Naifeld 2018). The model is intended to improve the teacher education experience, highlighting practicum processes.

The structure of the school-based experience (practicum) in Israel

The pre-service teacher's school-based experience (practicum) is usually conducted in the third year of college pre-service preparation, and is not considered part of the induction phase of novice teachers. The pre-service teachers are required to spend 6–12 weekly hours at school (the field) throughout the year. The practicum is guided by a teacher from a host school (mentor teacher) and a teacher educator representing the higher-education institution (college or university). The teacher educator is supervised by the head of the teacher education programme. The teacher educator has experience in K-12 instruction and is responsible for meeting the needs of the pre-service teachers' professional development by observing their instruction and providing feedback together with the mentor teacher. Usually, teacher educators work during the year with about 15 mentor teachers, visiting each pre-service teacher about 3–4 times at the school. Despite the importance of

the school-based experience, there is neither a particular training curriculum, nor defined prerequisites to becoming a teacher educator (Cochran-Smith et al. 2020; Naifeld and Nissim 2020).

The mentor teacher and the teacher educator are considered as two educators who work together for the benefit of the programme and the pre-service teachers, and can be both regarded as teacher educators. The meeting between the teacher educator and the mentor teacher is usually after the process of observing the lesson delivered by the pre-service teacher. Each educator, however, usually represents a different institution, either academia or the school. Because the teacher educator functions as a supervisor for the products of the teacher education programme, hierarchically s/he does not hold the role of a head teacher or manager. Thus, the teacher mentor is not subordinate to the teacher educator. The mentor teachers are selected by the head teacher in accordance with professional considerations. A mentor teacher is paid for this apprenticeship and can mentor up to two students at a time.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the current study was to describe relationships between educators in academia (college/university) and the field (school) in pre-service teacher education programmes, and to elicit the significance of those relationships for shaping the teacher education programmes. The research questions are:

Question 1: What are the characteristics of the relationships between the three main educators' roles – teacher educator, mentor teacher, and programme head?

Question 2: How do the relationships between the educators shape the teacher education programme?

Method

Research design

The present qualitative research was based on the phenomenological genre which focuses on 'describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon' (Creswell and Poth 2018, 75). Based on this approach, shared experiences of different educators holding similar roles in a teacher education programme can lead to a description with a universal essence (Van Manen 2014).

Field and participants

The research field comprised the teacher educator programmes in Israel in 2020. In that field, we first focused on the representation of the type of academic institution where the teacher education programme and the practical placement-based experience take place and therefore chose schools of education at four universities and eleven colleges of education and teaching. All the academic institutions train pre-service teachers for primary and secondary schools according to student tracking and preferences alongside

the availability of schools. The sample included a variety of geographical locations (north, centre, south) and educational sectors (thirteen in the Jewish sector, and two in the state Arab sector); levels of religious observance (out of the Jewish schools, 11 non-religious and two religious). The 45 participants comprised 13 males and 32 females, and their experience in education ranged from 5 to 18 years. Out of the 15 mentor teachers, 6 were from primary schools and 9 from secondary school.

After selecting the 15 academic institutions, an initial letter was sent to the programme heads in the selected institutions, between January and February 2020. This letter included an explanation of the research aims and the framework in which it would be performed, as well as an undertaking to uphold the accepted rules of ethics. After receiving the consent of the programme heads, a date was set for an interview. At the same time, these heads were asked to recommend a teacher educator from the academic institution who was familiar with the practicum experience and could share their views on it. We spoke with the recommended teacher educators and asked them to recommend mentor teachers. In this way, we located three educators from each institution: the programme head who worked at a particular college/university and was responsible for the teacher educators; a teacher educator who worked at the college/university and a mentor teacher who worked in a school supervising the pre-service teacher. (For an illustration of the educators, see [Figure 1](#)).

A total of 45 educators were interviewed in 15 Israeli institutions (three from each institution). The interviews were conducted and administered after obtaining formal approval from the Ethics Committee (IRB). All participants were informed about the aim of the study and the ethical rules and procedures applied before, during, and after the research. They also signed a formal consent form. In order to avoid bias in both interviewing and in data analysis, five researchers were involved in this process. The interviews were conducted by diverse interviewers according to an interview framework. Anonymity was obtained by removing explicit details about the institution.

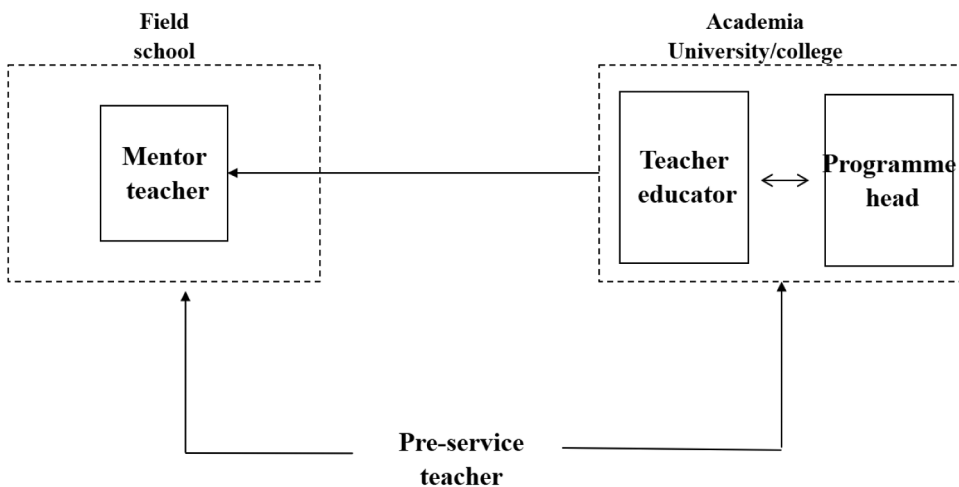


Figure 1. The structure of the institutions and the connections between the educators.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to maintain some consistency over the concepts covered in each interview (Flick 2018b). The interviews were conducted over the following six months, usually by the researchers themselves and sometimes by a research assistant. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and, after the pandemic erupted, others were held via Zoom. All interviews were transcribed and then analysed from August 2020 to April 2021.

Data analysis

The data analysis in this study was based on thematic analysis (Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2017), focusing on identifying and coding themes that represented the participants' ideas, patterns of beliefs, and perceptions (Marshall and Rossman 2016). The process yielded themes regarding the relationships between the educators and the possible outcomes of these relationships. The themes that emerged included different statements sharing similar meanings (for the full description of the themes and the segments, see Table 1). The first researcher was responsible for the initial coding, including the description of the segments for each theme, while other researchers rechecked the themes and the statements using these segments. In case of disagreement regarding the meaning of a certain theme, a discussion was held regarding the interpretation of the statements.

Findings

The first question addressed the relationships between the three main educators. The interviews suggest two themes: (a) *Who* forms the relationship, and what is its purpose?; and (b) *What* is the nature of the relationship? (For the illustration of the research questions see Figure 2)

Who forms the relationship, and what is its purpose?

The findings regarding the diverse relationships between the educators indicate that the relationships based on ties between educators from the field and from academia are less strong and occur less often, while in academia, the relationships are tighter. The relationship between *the teacher educator (from the university/college) and the mentor teacher (from the school)* was described by Margaret, a mentor teacher: *'The relationship between us relates to the pre-service teachers. We aren't involved with each other in pedagogical or managerial aspects ... I thought it would be more intense'*. This statement emphasises the aspiration of the mentor teacher for greater involvement in the programme, as illustrated by Natalie, a mentor teacher: *'I want to suggest pedagogical ideas and improvements, but I feel it is beyond my specific duty'*. Elizabeth, another mentor teacher, said:

She [the teacher educator] comes to see the pre-service teacher twice a year. We don't prepare for her visit. She has her duties. She is not my supervisor or my head teacher. Sometimes we sit and think together, usually about the trainee's poor performance.

Lisa, a teacher educator, added her perspective on these relationships:

Table 1. Themes and segments.

	Theme	Segments	Examples of quotes
First research question	(a) Who forms the relationships? What is the purpose of the relationships? (b) What is the nature of the relationships?	The educators: Mentor teacher and programme head; programme head and teacher educator; teacher educator and mentor teacher Advice, solving problems, joint meetings, share experiences <i>Professional</i> : Pedagogical issues, knowledge, curriculum content, and essential technological aspects of teaching <i>Bureaucratic</i> : Meeting regarding procedures, gaps between talking about pedagogy and not implementing it.	'I have to visit many schools. I know the mentor teachers, some of them more and some of them less' (Lisa). 'We work together; I ask her for advice and talk with her the problems I encounter. (Anne) (Robert). 'It is all about procedures that hardly involve pedagogy.' (Vivian)
Second research question	Highly bureaucratic profile Procedures which depend on personal relationships	Organising, scheduling, and staffing Used to work with . . . , know a person, comfortable with a person, rely on . . .	'Sometimes I feel like an official. I have a lot of ideas regarding how to do it in the right way. But there is never time . . .' (Sara) 'I am willing to work with a specific teacher educator because I feel comfortable with her' (Amy)

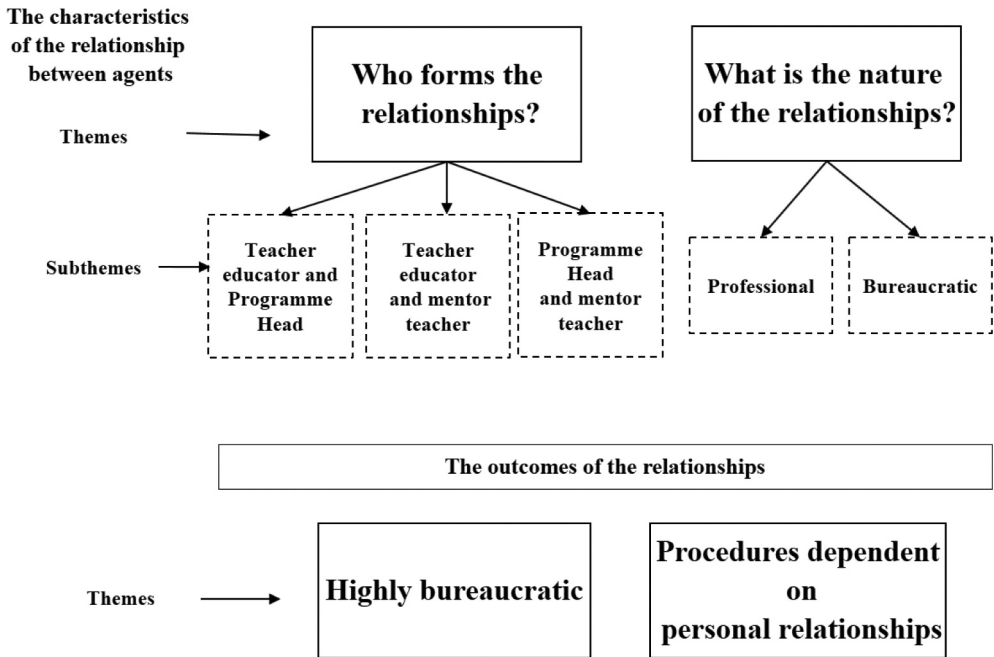


Figure 2. The description of the themes and the subthemes.

I have to visit many schools. I know the mentor teachers, some of them more and some of them less. Sometimes I am not satisfied with their work, but it is the head teacher's decision. I cannot decide not to work with a mentor teacher whom the head teacher has suggested.

It seems that although mentor teachers and educator teachers share some of their work with the pre-service teachers, each of them moves along parallel lines, with few meeting points, mainly relating to observation and supervision of the pre-service teachers. Both educators aspire for more involvement in the process. Mentor teachers feel they can contribute more from their practical knowledge, and the teacher educators feel they don't have enough time or authority to choose mentor teachers or to enhance their relationship.

The second relationship, between *the teacher educator and the programme head* is characterised by two educators who usually come from the academic sphere, working together as members of an academic staff and conducting a relationship based on a formal hierarchy. Diana, a programme head, remarked: *'In my position, I am in charge of six teacher educators. I am the one who's responsible for their promotion and the supervision of their efforts'*. Or, as Anne, a teacher educator, said: *'We work together; I ask her for advice and discuss with her the problems I encounter. We behave like colleagues. But she's in charge and she runs the whole programme'*. The relationship between these two educators is usually characterised by shared values and a shared pedagogical vision. The teacher educator in a specific college or university usually works in accordance with the demands of the institution and the head of the programme, who also hires the teacher educator. Thus, the relations are usually based on similar attitudes.

The third relationship is that between *the programme head and the mentor teacher*. This relationship again brings together academia and the school. The programme head relies on the teacher educator in order to achieve set goals. For example, Margaret, a mentor teacher, said:

I know who she is [the programme head] but I don't really know her vision, plans, and mindset regarding the teacher education programme or what she expects from mentors. The teacher educator is the mediator or the conduit of the messages. For me, it's a 'broken' process.

Rachel, another mentor teacher described:

I expected more collaboration. I imagined it differently. I thought we would have joint meetings and workshops in which we would talk about our experiences. I also want to learn how to be better. I feel that it is very technical.

The programme head, as perceived by the mentor teacher, is an educator that could be more involved and share educational knowledge.

What is the nature of the relationships?

The nature of the relationships was divided into two subthemes: professional-based relationships, and bureaucracy-based relationships. The professional-based relationships include aspects of pedagogy and the meaning of the teacher education programme. The educators described relationships that mostly focus on 'where and how', as was demonstrated for example by Robert, a teacher educator: *'I discuss with the mentor teacher ways of delivering the knowledge. I don't decide for her but rather offer her options'*, or Esther, a teacher educator, *'We have pedagogical lessons in which we think of co-teaching models or ways to improve the delivery of the subject matter. It is not enough. We don't have time, for example, to initiate new methods'*. Ely, the head of a programme also mentioned: *'The "how" is very important. We want to focus on how you teach, how you make things interesting, how you use different methods to enhance curiosity and innovation in teaching. Often, we don't reach these things in depth'*. The professional-based relationships seem to be perceived as less central in the programmes. The lacunas in *why* things are done bothered the educators who aspire to deepen the aspects of essential educational debates or challenges. As Jacob, a mentor teacher emphasises:

We don't sit together to talk about education and about what is right for our pre-service teachers. There is the problem of our location in two different places, and there is the problem of the routine that makes us take care of the here and now.

This direction is well demonstrated in the bureaucratic aspects.

Bureaucracy-based relationships were broadly discussed by the three educators interviewed in the current study. Hilary, a programme head, described them thus:

Many hours are spent on timetabling, coordination, assigning, and staffing. We start in August. Special attention is given to matching the pre-service teacher to the school but most of the considerations involve constraints and distances, especially because we're located in an outlying region.

Vivian, a mentor teacher, added: *'It is all about procedures that hardly involve pedagogy: it is scheduling, when the observation will take place, and forms, lots of forms'*. Another mentor teacher, Ina, said: *'There is a lot of talk about technology, and new methods, and pedagogical aspects but in the end we deal with and talk about procedures, mostly technical and not technological'*. Finally, Harriet, a teacher educator, offered: *'Usually I speak with my superior (the programme head) about stuff that relates to coordination and constraints. I don't remember when we actually talked about improving pedagogy'*.

The second research question emphasised how relationships between the three educators shape the teacher education programme. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: (1) A highly bureaucratic profile; and (2) Procedures dependent on personal relationships. The two themes are further presented as established by the respondents' statements:

A highly bureaucratic profile

The highly bureaucratic profile emphasises the efforts that educators invest in bureaucratic issues. It was described by all three types of educators and perceived as part of the relationship beyond the role of each of them separately. As Andrea, a teacher educator, described: *'I am bureaucratic rather than pedagogical. It is happening because I need to move from the college to the school, and I don't work with the mentor teacher constantly. It takes the procedure to smooth work processes'*. While the pedagogical aspects are central to a teacher education programme, it seems that much effort and many resources are channelled into bureaucratic aspects. Linda, a teacher educator, pointed out: *'There is also our task in July and August to call the head teachers, look for good teachers who will fit well in practical work. There's a lot of supplementary work to be done, let's say'*. Nora, another teacher educator, said: *'I travel a lot. Really a lot. Long distances. Sometimes it feels like I'm traveling or making phone calls about procedures that don't always promote essential matters for the trainees'*. Bureaucracy-based relationships can be the cause or result of multiple procedures that are not pedagogical in nature, which then become an integral part and even a major part of the teacher education programme. Sara, a mentor teacher, described the situation:

I feel that it is all about organizing things. A lot of preparation is not related to the teaching itself. Sometimes I feel like an official. I have a lot of ideas regarding how to do it in the right way. But there is never time nor willingness to accept it.

It seems that bureaucracy-based relationships tend to displace professional and pedagogical aspects, as the energy of both time and distance between the organisations (geographically and symbolically) is invested in keeping the routine of the programme and the tasks that need to be done.

Procedures dependent on personal relationships

Finally, since many of the procedures are not very clear, they become based on personal rather than professional relationships. The statements that established this theme demonstrate the attribution of the educators in the different roles to their personal intervention or impact on the procedure that should be taken care of more systematically.

For example: *'Things only get done if I'm here'* (Eveline, teacher educator), or *'I feel comfortable working with her'* (Natalie, mentor teacher). Some of these statements demonstrate the personal aspects of the relationships. For example, Margaret, a mentor teacher, feels that she is only willing to fulfil the role of mentor teacher because she works with a specific teacher educator: *'I'm used to her. She would not ask me for things I don't believe in, like implementing technology in class for the benefit of the students. We know each other well, and it's a kind of friendship'*. Or as Amy, another mentor teacher, said: *'I am willing to work with a specific teacher educator because I feel comfortable with her. [Otherwise], for me it is a burden, so I prefer to do it with someone I trust'*. Sheila, a teacher educator mentioned:

I work with many mentor teachers. I see the differences. I can't choose who to work with but when I can rely on the teacher, it is to the benefit of the work and the pre-service teacher. Positive relationships make things happen.

Finally, Iris, a programme head mentioned:

I have teacher educators and mentor teachers who became friends, and we even continue to work on other projects. When there is a good match, it is fruitful, particularly when it is a combination of two organisations with different cultures.

Dependence on personal relationships is common in organisations. The interviewees in the current study described these relationships as part of overcoming the loose ties between the two organisations. Thus, more efforts are invested in the familiar routines rather than challenging these relations with new people or new procedures. While personal emphasis can be beneficial, it can also be less useful for the development and innovation of the programmes.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the characteristics of the relationship built between educators in two arenas: academia and the field, and how those relationships shape teacher education programmes. Teacher education is shifting from a traditional model to one that involves the school as the centre but this shift has not yet fully taken place. In other words, a programme that takes place in different institutions leads to loosely existing ties between the people. Thus, for example, teacher educators are responsible for supervising pre-service teachers who need close mentoring in several schools. While this may be perceived as a positive aspect of a loosely coupled connection (Pang 2004), it can also reflect distributed work, lacking in tight procedures when they are needed.

In addition, the loose connections determine the nature of the relationships. From the data collected, most of the procedures by the three different educators were broadly focused on staffing, organising, and scheduling. This could be part of a general phenomenon in the education system as engaging in the time given to bureaucratic tasks could be made more efficient (Usol'tsev 2018). It seems that the model of moving towards combining the two arenas – academia and the field (Nissim and Naifeld 2018) – is not fully implemented and thus does not reflect the needs of pre-service teachers in terms of meaningful teacher education programme. A shift towards tightening the couplings between different hierarchical levels in the field and in academia should be made by enhancing the mentor teachers' and teacher educators' performance of instructional

leadership and by their participation in managerial and policy decisions in school (Ståhlkrantz and Rapp 2020). Thus, educators can act as agents, encouraged by valuing the learning of people, making time and resources available (Anderson et al. 2022). This direction needs support and acknowledgement at the leadership and policy level of the two institutions (Cloonan, Paatsch, and Hutchison 2022).

The characteristics of the relationships as described and discussed can be seen as shaping the teacher education programme. First, a highly bureaucratic profile appears to be a major part of the teacher education programme. Focusing on loose coupling in the school as an educational setting, Shen, Gao and Xia (2017, 672) argued that 'in order to change the technical core of teaching, the loosely coupled organization has to be tightened. Such assumption only emphasizes the bureaucratic facet of a school but misses its cultural aspect'. Thus, focusing on strong bureaucratic processes may often be used to overcome the deficit of loose coupling (Cheng 2008) and can be regarded as less appropriate for the desirable changes in the teacher education programme. Previous research has shown that loose coupling enables a professional orientation (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen 2018). However, the findings of the present study indicate a different perspective.

Second, procedures dependent on personal relationships demonstrate the tendency to act and behave as individuals rather than team players, highlighting informal channels (Orton and Weick 1990). The educators' descriptions indicate that further connections are needed in the teacher education programme process in order to deepen the implementation of the capabilities and professional skills of all the participants, including the mentor teachers (Orland-Barak 2014; Sandvik et al. 2019) and the pre-service teachers themselves. Thus, well-designed placement-based experiences with strong mentoring in high-quality settings is needed (Darling-Hammond 2023) to overcome barriers and disadvantages arising in the teacher education programmes. Positioning the educators in the role of boundary spanners can illuminate their contribution to the tight connection between academia and the field (Klein 2017) and enhance their actions as team players.

Generally integrating the findings in the current study, two main issues can be discussed. *First*, moving from traditional academic to field-focused programmes can be considered a significant step in promoting the quality of the teacher education programme, by enhancing and highlighting its placement-based (clinical) aspects (Becher and Lefstein 2020). Since a programme will still take place in two arenas, additional efforts should therefore be made regarding the nature of the coupling between the different educators; thus, 'balancing loose and tight aspects through simultaneous loose and tight coupling is considered as a characteristic of effective and excellent educational organizations' (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen 2018, 252). Yet, as White, Timmermans and Dickerson (2022) recently suggest, the academia-school partnership is challenged and needs further thinking regarding the enhancement of the partnership by tightening the relationships between educators in both institutions.

Second, bureaucratic procedures were found to be central in the educators' perceptions of their work, taking up their time and energy. As a framework for teacher education programmes, the loosely coupled paradigm can offer an interesting perspective for the findings which emerged. On the one hand, the loose characteristics can be useful for the challenges of teacher education programme and its non-linear conditions (Sergiovanni 1995). Procedures dependent on personal relationships can demonstrate flexibility and

enhance job satisfaction and commitment to work (Hökkä and Vähäsantanen 2014), as human resource becomes more central. Teacher education programmes can thus benefit from the autonomy given to the educators who use creativity, informal channels, and experience to promote and improve the teacher education programme. On the other hand, loose patterns can be seen differently. The lack of mutual assistance, fewer discussions about mistakes, and less exposure to information can demonstrate the 'dark side' of teacher education programmes.

Relying on a highly bureaucratic profile, alongside a fairly unclear and implied hierarchical level yielded strategies that educators used which are less professionally oriented and are derived from the need to overcome the loose features. The theoretical perspective of the loosely coupled paradigm highlights the managerial and administrative aspects of teacher education programmes, where connections and relationships are essential, particularly as teacher education takes place in two arenas aimed at creating mutual and shared processes.

Importance and implications of the study

The current study shed light on the aspects of bureaucratic procedures emerging from the descriptions given by the different educators involved in the teacher education programmes. Although the study was conducted in Israel and is context-dependent, it may shed light on teacher education programmes in other contexts. While bureaucratic procedures are not new to education administration systems worldwide, it is crucial to identify the barriers and challenges of these procedures in two separate or distinguished organisations that are working together. Policy agents and leaders in these programmes should be aware of the mechanism that underlies the work and estimate the costs of the loose connections as reflected in the outcome of the programmes and the educators involved in them.

Thus, while the experience in the field alongside the placement-based aspects of the teacher education programme become highly evaluated, more efforts and planning should be invested in establishing the ties between all the people involved in these programmes, giving those involved (mentor teachers and teacher educators) greater significance in decision-making related to managerial and pedagogical domains.

Both methodological and practical implications can be drawn from the findings. Regarding the former, the present study emphasises different views of educators whose responsibility and authority is to work for the benefit of pre-service teachers and the quality of the teacher education programmes. *Triangulating* three different points of view (Flick 2018a) enhanced understanding of the complexity of the relationships in different institutions.

As for practical implications, several recommendations can be made. *First*, more attention should be given to mentoring teachers who often perceive themselves as isolated and 'cut off' from the teacher education programme. The teacher education programme should highlight the mentor teachers' needs by making them more involved in professional aspects and policy-level decisions. *Second*, the 'professional identity' of the teacher educator needs greater focus and clarification. As their relationships are considered to be more bureaucratic in nature, careful and comprehensive attention should be given to their role and how to utilise their professional knowledge, competence, and experience to

the fullest, considering their position between the two arenas – academia and school. Educators' priorities should be set at the policy level and administrative help should be provided where needed.

This can be particularly relevant in the post-Covid period, as gaps and challenges have arisen in the school arena and might be part of the issues that both mentor teachers and teacher educators confront. It is worth mentioning that the study took place at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the extent, meaning, and impact of the pandemic was not fully understood at the time of data collection, it was mentioned by interviewees with regard to bureaucratic features and workload as a result of the transition to distance learning and coping with lockdowns. Recent studies have emphasised the challenges of teacher educators during the crisis (e.g. Williams, Sayed, and Singh 2022) alongside studies indicating that the teaching practicum conducted in times of crisis was experienced as positive and beneficial by the pre-service teachers (Choi and Park 2022; Naifeld and Nissim 2022). Thus, further examination should be conducted on the implication of the pandemic on the nature of the relationships of educators in teacher education programmes.

Limitations of the study

While this study notes some important implications, it also has some limitations. The study focused solely on the self-reports of educators. Additional measurements should be used in future studies, such as observations in both the academia and school arenas. Further studies might also concentrate on obtaining data regarding the same issues from pre-service teachers, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In addition, the study was conducted in the Israeli context. Some of the issues discussed are indeed relevant to and studied in many countries, particularly the constant discourse over beneficial and high-standard teacher education programmes for pre-service teachers that are more rooted in the field. Yet, the sociocultural features presented here are more local and context-dependent. Future comparative studies could tighten the similarities and differences between cultures in different countries and distinguish the international implications of the study.

Finally, head teachers play a key role in the teacher education practicum and in understanding how loose coupling is reinforced and can be changed. While the current study illuminates the views of other educators, the perceptions of the head teachers should be further examined in future studies, focusing on their views regarding the connections between the institutions and the considerations for selecting mentor teachers; integrating the teacher educators in school; and school involvement in research-based activities initiated by diverse educators and head teachers.

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