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Competency-based Teacher Standards in Montenegro: Integrative Perspective on the Teaching Profession and Teacher Education

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Introduction: Initial Teacher Education in Montenegro

In Montenegro, initial teacher education (ITE) is predominantly carried out at the University of Montenegro (UCG), the only public university in the country. In addition to UCG, other higher education institutions also contribute to the education of teachers for various subjects; however, these programs differ in terms of structure and pedagogical components (Vučković, Mićanović & Novović, 2023).

There are three main models of initial teacher education (G1, G2, G3):

- **G1** includes preschool and primary school teachers, who are educated through integrated and interdisciplinary programs with a strong focus on pedagogical-psychological and didactic-methodological disciplines, as well as through extensive school-based practice.
- **G2** refers to subject teachers in upper primary and secondary schools, whose education is primarily oriented towards subject-specific content, with a limited number of pedagogical and didactic courses.
- **G3** comprises teachers of vocational subjects in secondary vocational schools, whose education is based solely on their field of expertise, without formal pedagogical training.

This report focuses on teachers and preschool educators (G1 group) who are educated at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Montenegro.

Teacher Competency Standards

The *Competency Standards for Teachers and Headteachers in Educational Institutions* (2016) represent a key framework for defining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers are expected to develop during both initial and continuous teacher education. Although these standards are not mandatory for universities, they served as the foundation for the development of an additional accreditation standard for ITE (Initial Teacher Education) programs in 2022, created by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AKOKVO) in cooperation with relevant institutions.

For primary school teachers and subject teachers, eight standards are defined:

- **S1: Learners and the teaching and learning process** – Understanding students, their needs and potential; setting goals and monitoring progress.
- **S2: Effective and safe learning environment** – Creating a stimulating, constructivist-oriented classroom.
- **S3: Subject and professional knowledge** – In-depth knowledge of subject content and its didactic challenges.
- **S4: Subject methodology knowledge** – Applying various teaching strategies and methods.



- **S5: Lesson planning and preparation** – Annual, monthly, and daily planning that takes into account the learners’ needs.
- **S6: Assessment and evaluation** – Formative and summative assessment aimed at improving the learning process.
- **S7: Professional development** – Continuous improvement, self-evaluation, and collaboration within professional communities.
- **S8: Leadership and collaboration** – Active communication with parents, colleagues, and the community, along with assuming leadership roles.

For preschool educators, the standards are adapted to early childhood education and the child’s social context:

- Partnership with the family and local community
- Stimulating environment for learning and development
- Inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds
- Planning of activities
- Learning methods and strategies
- Documentation and evaluation of the learning process
- Professional development
- Adherence to professional ethics

The Impact of Standards on Curricula and the Focus Group Discussion on Standards and Dispositions

Although the 2016 standards were not mandatory at the time of the reaccreditation of the University of Montenegro (UoM), they served as a reference point for the creation of an additional standard adopted in 2022. This standard requires ITE (Initial Teacher Education) programs (300 ECTS credits, for preschool teachers 180 ECTS) to ensure the acquisition of both teaching and subject-matter competencies through practical work in schools. Prior to this, the curricula for teachers and preschool educators were developed based on the National Qualifications Framework (MQF), with an emphasis on the integration of knowledge, skills, and competencies. These programs include courses in science and the arts, pedagogical and psychological disciplines, and didactics and methodology, with a strong focus on school practice, the analysis of teaching situations, and mentoring support. All activities are aimed at developing a professional teacher identity that understands the complexity of classroom reality and acts in accordance with the standards of the profession.

In the focus group discussion among university professors on teacher education, a deep and engaged reflection emerged concerning the teacher education standards and the current crisis in which this education finds itself. There is a prevailing sense that something essential is being lost in modern pedagogical models—namely, the human element, relationships, ethics, and time—and that a holistic approach is lacking.



At the beginning of the conversation, dissatisfaction is clearly expressed toward traditional approaches, which are seen as inadequate for dealing with the complexity of the human experience in education. One participant emphasized that the real answer must be sought “from within,” through the ethical revitalization of education. Learning cannot be reduced to the “transfer of knowledge,” as it has never been merely that. Instead, education must return to its dialogical and emancipatory dimensions, which are now overshadowed by the logic of knowledge delivery and technologies (including artificial intelligence) that reinforce this logic.

It becomes increasingly apparent that modern education resembles a market service. Teachers are reduced to technical staff who deliver pre-defined information, and students become clients who “consume” that information. This kind of “service pedagogy” leaves no room for creativity, critical thinking, or genuine learning. Participants recognize that such processes are driven by a neoliberal agenda that values speed, efficiency, and quantity over meaning, relationships, and growth.

Special attention is given to the issue of time in pedagogy. Time is no longer an ally of education but its enemy. Everything must be instant—“at a click”—without frustration, without waiting. In this context, the “pedagogical moment” is lost—the space of reflection, doubt, discovery, and even mistakes—that allows learners to mature. Without this time, students are left without real experience, without desire, without meaningful contact with themselves or others.

Technology, especially artificial intelligence, occupies a significant portion of the discussion. The question is raised: can a teacher still be authentic without relying on digital tools? While digital literacy is recognized as essential for 21st century, there is concern that the teacher may become merely a “monitor”—someone who only tracks and records data, without having a real impact on student development. It is emphasized that no technology can replace the human capacity for empathy, understanding, emotional and moral presence.

Another issue in contemporary education is the excessive adaptation to every student, to the extent that failure is no longer allowed. Participants believe that failure is essential for identity formation, as it enables confrontation with oneself and one's own limits. Without such encounters, children do not develop resilience or true individuality.

During the discussion on guidelines for teacher education, concerns are raised that pedagogy is increasingly being reduced to technique, to “pedagogical engineering” and content design, while the essential role of the teacher—as a person who, by their very being, influences the development of another human being—is neglected. The danger of the “banking model” of education is highlighted—a model in which knowledge is “deposited” into students—and it is stressed that true learning must always be transformative.

A dominant theme is the teacher's responsibility to remain committed to ethics, dialogue, and deep human connection. Artificial intelligence can be a useful tool for teachers, but without a true educator—dedicated, thoughtful, and present—no technology has real value. “Artificial intelligence is useless if we don't have excellent teachers,” said one of the participants, capturing the core message of the entire meeting. Behind every standard, every document, every guideline, there must be a person—a teacher who reflects, acts, and stays true to their vocation. At the same



time, the fragmentation of teacher education driven by lists and standards always threatens to obscure the broader picture—the holistic vision.

Participants of the second focus group were introduced, prior to the discussion, to the BTDD dispositions model, which served as a guiding idea for the development of this project and was presented in a *position paper* (Dhert & Elen, 2023). Dispositions are tendencies toward certain types of behavior in context, rather than exhaustive lists of knowledge or skills. Focus group participants were asked to compare the Montenegrin Teacher Education Standards with the BTDD dispositions (*collaborating, contextualizing, designing, enacting, and inquiring*). Following the discussion, two tables were created—Table 1 illustrates how teacher education standards correspond with the BTDD model, while Table 2 shows how standards for preschool educators align with the same model.

The idea was to identify and "preserve" all national legislative standards within the dispositions model while assessing a broader, more holistic approach to teacher education.

Table 1: Comparison of Standards and BTDD Dispositions

Standard	BTDD Dispositions
S1: Students and the learning process	contextualizing designing enacting
S2: Safe and stimulating environment	designing enacting collaborating
S3: Knowledge of profession and subject	inquiring contextualizing
S4: Teaching methodology	designing inquiring contextualizing
S5: Planning and lesson preparation	designing contextualizing
S6: Assessment and evaluation	inquiring enacting designing
S7: Professional development	inquiring collaborating
S8: Leadership and collaboration	collaborating enacting

Table 2: Comparison of Standards for Preschool Educators with BTDD Dispositions

Standard (Preschool Teachers)	BTDD Dispositions
1: Partnership with families and the community	collaborating contextualizing
2: Learning and developmental environment	designing enacting
3: Inclusion	contextualizing collaborating enacting
4: Activity planning	designing
5: Methods and strategies	designing inquiring
6: Documentation and evaluation	inquiring enacting
7: Professional development	inquiring collaborating
8: Professional ethics	enacting contextualizing

Discussion

During the discussion, it was concluded that the BTDD dispositions encompass the cognitive, ethical, and relational dimensions of the teaching profession. They address complex and contextual responses to practical challenges and include learning through reflection, collaboration, and action—not merely technical knowledge application. Dispositions are seen as inherently holistic.

According to participants, the dispositions correspond to:

- Pedagogical-didactic work: S1, S2, S4, S5.
- Reflective and research-based practice: S3, S6, S7.
- Collaboration, ethics, and context: S8 and preschool educator standards.

However, it was also noted that the current BTDD model does not directly cover:

- Professional, academic, and subject-specific knowledge - S3 (Knowledge of the profession and subject).
- Technical and legal precision in assessment - S6 (Evaluation).
- Normative-ethical and legal aspects of professionalism - S8 (Ethics – standard for preschool educators).

Focus group participants emphasized that a final evaluation should be based on a deeper and more detailed comparative analysis. Based on the current comparison, they proposed two potential directions:



- Extend the model with three new dispositions, or
- Broaden the scope of the existing five dispositions to fully encompass all standards and their components.

Table 3 – Expansion of the BTDD Model (First Idea)

New Disposition	Description	Covered Standards
Subject-Matter Knowledge and Expertise	Disposition for the continuous acquisition, updating, and application of deep and broad subject knowledge within a disciplinary and educational domain.	S3: Knowledge of the profession and subject S4: Subject methodology
Ethical Responsibility and Professional Integrity	Disposition to always act in accordance with the ethical principles of the profession, with honesty and full awareness of the teacher's professional and moral obligations.	VS8: Ethics (for preschool educators) Elements from all standards
Reflective Professional Development	Disposition for critically and continuously reassessing one's knowledge, work, and ethical principles for the sake of professional and personal growth.	S7: Professional development S6: Evaluation

The existing BTDD dispositions cover the majority of the standards, particularly those related to interaction, context, creativity, implementation, and reflection. However, the new dispositions target important areas such as subject knowledge, ethical responsibility, and lifelong professional growth—areas not explicitly detailed in the original BTDD model but emphasized in the national competency standards. The disposition on ethical responsibility gains special importance in the era of AI and was notably discussed.

Table 4 - Integrating New Elements into Existing BTDD Dispositions (Second Idea)

Existing BTDD Disposition	How to Integrate the New Dispositions	Examples of Integration
Collaborating	Broaden collaboration to include ethical responsibility and professional integrity in relations with colleagues, students, and the community.	Collaboration implies not only communication and teamwork, but also adherence to ethical principles, trust, and professional responsibility in all relationships.



Contextualising	Include continuous professional development and reflection as part of adapting teaching to specific contexts.	Adapting teaching practices requires ongoing professional growth through reflection on real-world outcomes and readiness to learn from experience.
Designing	Integrate subject-matter expertise and pedagogical-methodological approaches into the creation of inclusive and challenging educational situations.	Designing lessons involves applying deep, up-to-date subject knowledge along with pedagogical methods that encourage critical thinking and inquiry.
Enacting	Incorporate professional integrity and ethical conduct as part of responsible and decisive implementation in dynamic classroom settings.	Responsible teaching includes an ethical dimension—respecting student rights, ensuring fairness and transparency, and consistently upholding professional standards.
Inquiring	Expand reflective practice to include inquiring into subject-matter knowledge, ethical issues, and professional development.	Critical reflection encompasses ongoing learning, analysis of one's values and beliefs, and consideration of ethical dilemmas in education.

Important assumptions included the following:

- Subject-matter knowledge and methodology fall under Designing because they relate to the creation and adaptation of teaching content and methods.
- Professional ethics and integrity naturally fit within Collaborating and Enacting, as they concern behaviors in professional work and relationships.
- Reflective learning and professional development are part of Inquiring, and to some extent Contextualising, as they imply ongoing improvement in alignment with the work context.

This approach preserves the five clear and functional dispositions, while also making the model broader and deeper in meaning—covering all key aspects of teaching standards.

Conclusion

Initial teacher education in Montenegro, though institutionally structured through different models (G1, G2, G3) and predominantly led by the University of Montenegro, faces numerous structural and substantive challenges. While the competency standards offer a framework of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers should develop, discussions among experts reveal deep dissatisfaction with current educational trends. These trends favor technical and market-based approaches, while neglecting ethics, dialogue, and the holistic development of teachers as



complete human beings. There is a particular need to move teacher education beyond the frameworks of "pedagogical engineering" and "service-based pedagogy" and redirect it toward genuine human encounter, reflection, and professional ethics.

In this regard, the BTDD disposition model, which emphasizes tendencies to act in complex contexts, is recognized as a potentially stronger and more integrative framework for teachers' professional development. However, analysis shows that this model needs to be expanded further in order to fully encompass the key elements of subject-matter knowledge, ethical responsibility, and lifelong professional growth.

In conclusion, effective and meaningful teacher education must go beyond simple compliance with standards. It must cultivate reflective thinking, ethical commitment, authentic relationships, and contextual understanding—because without such teachers, even the most advanced models and technologies cannot ensure quality education. The integrated dispositions encompass a broader range of competencies—from expertise and pedagogical skills, through ethical responsibility and professional identity, to the capacity for reflective learning and adaptation to context. They offer a functional, practical, and holistic framework for teacher development in today's complex and dynamic educational environment—especially vital in the age of genAI.

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