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Teacher Professional Standards, Accountability and Ideology: Alternative Discourses

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Abstract: Teacher professional standards and accountability are today writ large on the landscape of both schooling and teacher education practice around the world. This paper explores some of the related debates through a discussion of four discourses on teacher professional standards: namely, discourses of commonsense, professionalism and quality, managerialism/performativity, and strategic manoeuvring. It is argued that each of these discourses legitimises particular understandings of standards and quality, illustrating the competing set of lenses through which they are viewed, as well as the broader ideologies from which they emerge, including neoliberalism and technical rationality. These discourses also represent the interpretive practice that characterise a context in which teacher professional standards are being entrenched and institutionalised through policy design and accountability processes. In analysing these discourses, a number of questions emerge, primary amongst which is the issue of the unintended consequences of a focus on standards, some of which may act to inadvertently mask other 'quality' matters

Introduction

Standards and quality form the cornerstone of many national education policy developments around the world today, raising questions about the role of professional standards for teaching within these systems. This paper analyses current debates on teacher professional standards, primarily from the Australian context, and presents four discourses that emerge from this analysis. These discourses represent the interpretive practice that characterise a context in which teacher professional standards are being entrenched and institutionalised through policy design and accountability processes. This paper, while accepting that they are important, argues that as standards become entrenched and institutionalised in policy texts and discourses, there is some uncertainty about whether they can achieve the quality that they seem to inherently seek, and at what cost. In the examination of alternative discourses surrounding teacher professional standards, there is also a question of whether there are spaces available for contestation over commonly accepted discourses in the landscape of educational change and reform in Australia.

Background: National and Global Developments

Teacher professional standards and accountability are today writ large on the landscape of both schooling and teacher education practice. In Australia, these issues have recently come further to the fore with the launching in February 2011 of the *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, a document which is expected, in due course, to

supersede comparable local state and territory documents. Following on from this development, *The National Standards for Initial Teacher Education* were released in April 2011. These are elaborated on in a set of ‘Standards & Procedures’ that govern the ‘Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia’ (MCEECDYA, 2011).

The body responsible for teacher professional standards in Australia, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), was established in January 2010 and reports to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), the national body of state and territory ministers of education. Although states and territories are still working with local standards and guidelines, AITSL is responsible for providing “national leadership for the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership” (AITSL, 2011c).

In a recent development, AITSL has indicated that it is beginning a pilot of the standards to “determine what further support is required for implementation of the Standards” (AITSL, 2011c). Moreover, AITSL has now identified that its “next steps” will focus on development of “support materials” that will “provide examples of effective practice to support the implementation of the Standards” (AITSL, 2011b). They will also develop “evidence guides” that will be used to “support the principles, policy and processes for accreditation, registration and certification” (AITSL, 2011b).

As yet, the national standards have not been implemented, but it is clear that this is the road that Australia is taking in its efforts to “promote excellence in teaching and provide a nationally consistent basis for recognising quality teaching” (AITSL, 2011c). This is a road that has been taken by many other nations globally including New Zealand, the UK, the US, and some European states. The global dimensions of teacher professional standards are not the subject of this paper, but suffice to say that, firstly, in countries like New Zealand, the UK and the US, there is evidence that the reform movements have not always had desired outcomes (Delandshere & Petrosky 2004; Winter, 2000; Thomas, 2004; Thrupp, 2006). Moreover, and of particular interest to this paper, there is also the issue of what Robin Alexander (2010) refers to as “collateral damage” where, in the UK experience for example, standardised tests and professional standards may have “yielded gains” but “at some cost, educationally, and professionally as well as financially” (p.7). Summarising findings from a British government-funded *Cambridge Primary Review*, Alexander (2010) goes on to say that “in many primary schools a professional culture of excitement, inventiveness and healthy scepticism has been supplanted by one of dependency, compliance and even fear; and the approach may in some cases have depressed both standards of learning and the quality of teaching” (p.7).

What is also clear is that, while there is general support for the idea of standards, there are some controversies surrounding their design and implementation, and in particular over the extent of teacher ‘ownership’ in this process. For example, after a thorough review of all aspects of the issue, Zuzovsky & Lipman (2006) concluded that, “the value of standards is not questioned. What is questioned is their imposition as controlling devices” (p.48).

The second point in regards to global aspects of teacher professional standards is that there are a number of developed countries that have not established a set of teacher professional standards. Amongst them is Finland, a country that ranks 3rd after Belgium and Canada in the PISA, an international assessment of the reading, science and mathematical literacy of 15-year-old students. But interestingly, according to Eurydice (2009) as discussed by Alexander (2010), Finland has “no national tests, no league tables, no national system of inspection, no national teaching strategies, and indeed none of the so-called ‘levers’ of systemic reform in which the British government has invested so much. Clear assessment criteria are written into the national curriculum and are regularly applied by teachers, but there is no national testing as such until the national matriculation examination at the end of secondary education” (p. 12).

Working from this overview of the Australian national policy context, and as ensconced within broader global understandings, the next section of this paper will now identify a set of discourses that characterise current debates on teacher professional standards, analysing what this might mean for ‘quality’ in education, and consequently for the work of both teachers and teacher educators.

Standards, Discourses and Ideology

Discourse of commonsense

In commonsense terms, having ‘standards’ will always be a good thing. Who would not want schools and universities to uphold professional teaching standards of some sort? Similar to this is the exhortation to provide ‘quality’ learning experiences, and to ensure that teachers strive for ‘excellent’ outcomes. These are statements with which all would agree. Unsurprisingly, there is certainly no discussion of ways to reduce ‘quality’, or work against ‘excellence’, or lower standards of teaching.

Much of the public rhetoric surrounding standards and their value would fit within this discourse. Usually this comes in response to a public concern with declining standards and the need to engage in systemic education reform. However, as Sachs (2003) suggests, the “purpose of a commonsense view of teacher professional standards is to present an uncritical view of professional standards ... that it makes sense to put in place a regulatory framework that provides for quality, whatever that might mean” (p.177). Supporting this uncritical view of standards is a technical-rational ideology which is embedded in the neoliberal global system of capitalism.

Technical rationality, a form of rationality that is instrumental in nature, is also referred to as ‘instrumental rationality’. Instrumentalists suggest that the “rational methods that have so rapidly advanced technological endeavours such as communications, medicine, warfare, transportation, and agriculture will lead to the similar rationalisation of other areas of society and culture, such as politics, art, management, religion, law and education” (Lefstein, 2005, p. 335). Thus instrumental views of science which include an emphasis on certainty, objectivity, the ‘scientific-method’ of measurement, efficiency, and control are, within a technical rationality, transferred to understandings about education and teaching. Instrumental rationalism is a scientific philosophy that for many is of value only as it applies to non-human phenomenon (Fay, 1975). The social sciences, it is argued, along with the discipline of education (Loughran & Russell, 2007), cannot be adequately explained, researched or advanced within such a ideology of instrumental rationalism (Beyer, 1988).

If we view teacher professional standards via a discourse of commonsense, underpinned by a technical rational ideology, we would see the ‘problems’ of schooling and education as fairly simple, and relatively easy to solve. Of importance would be the need to control all the players so that the desired outcome can be achieved. One of the easiest ways to be seen to be in control is to set in place a system of controls and measures via standards as a form of accountability. In line with the technical rationality ideology, this process is fairly linear, but tends to downplay any hint of complexity or difference. It is also a non-situated view, and seemingly can be applicable across all settings, once again proving agreeable to a commonsense view of educational problems and how to resolve them. Hence, the weakness of this commonsense view is that it “overlooks the complexity of teachers’ work and the strongly contextualised situations in which moral, social and political decisions about subject, person and groups are made and remade in the everyday life of teachers and student teachers” (Winter, 2000, pp.155 – 156). This point will take clearer shape as we look at other discourses of teacher standards, especially that of professionalism and quality.

The type of research that works from within a discourse of commonsense tends to focus on whether or not participants have achieved a set of prescribed standards, or whether

or not an institution is adhering to these externally-set standards. Within this discourse, it is understandable that the emphasis is on working within a regulatory framework, as this is defined as what is important. Hudson (2009) provides one such example of research that works from within this framework. The research asks, “How can preservice teachers be measured against advocated professional standards?” (p.65). Data collected depended upon self-report, and in essence measured preservice teachers’ perceptions about how well they considered themselves able to implement the given standards. In terms of the beliefs expressed about the coursework that they had completed, results were generally positive. The researcher concludes that the evidence collected in the study would help in “re-evaluating the aims of a coursework unit to more adequately reflect a specific standard”, and furthermore, “researchers and educators must commence investigating the development of reliable instruments and measures that can adequately determine the achievement of teaching standards” (Hudson, 2009, p.70). Likewise, research by Swabey, Castleton and Penney (2010) concluded that their data point to “strengths and weaknesses in teacher preparation and demonstrate the value of employing the standards framework as a reference point in teacher education research” (p.29). To the extent that these were largely a measurement and descriptive type of study, it can be asked whether standards, as a form of policy reform, were in fact a “mechanism to control teachers and the teaching profession” (Sachs, 2003, p.177).

Discourse of Professionalisation and Quality

Proponents of standards would suggest that, in defining what is expected of teachers at various levels, they act as an articulated form of ‘professional’ status to which teachers can aspire. This in turn will lift the status of teachers in the public perception. According to AITSL, “Teachers can use the Standards to recognise their current and developing capabilities, professional aspirations and achievements. Because the Standards are explicit and public they allow teachers to demonstrate levels of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement. In this way teacher standards contribute to the professionalisation of teaching and raise the status of the profession” (2011a). Much of the research and writing of Lawrence Ingvarson supports this position; one of Ingvarson’s most recent publications provides a historical perspective on the place of standards in the Australian system, suggesting that a properly implemented standards system has the potential “to revolutionise professional learning for teachers and school leaders and to create a much more effective system—a standards-guided professional learning system, one more fitted to a teaching profession” and that “a high priority for [the newly established] AITSL must be to have the profession on board as well” (2010, p.67). In terms of teacher ownership of systemic reform, this is a very important objective, but the extent of achievement is yet unclear.

Nevertheless, one of the areas that has been seen to be successful in the Australian context has been in the development of professional standards within the specific subject areas of English, mathematics and science. But even so, as various papers have shown, the situation is far from straightforward. For example, in a paper that looks at standards for teachers of English language and literacy in Australia (STELLA), Doecke (2001) argues for an alternative view of standards that mediates between public and personal domains, and that deals with issues of ‘inclusivity’ or ‘exclusivity’ with regards to ownership of standards. He suggests that the aim should be to move “beyond a public rhetoric (whether that of government bureaucracies or professional associations) and to explore the ways in which standards documents are actually registered at a personal level” (p.174).

A stronger position against standards is expressed by a study carried out within the art education curriculum area (Thomas, 2005). This study draws on the findings of a longitudinal study of creativity in art education and concludes that “the standards are incapable of

determining practice as proposed by the [NSWIT proposed teacher standards] framework, and the art teacher's virtuoso performances are irreducible to the draft competencies" (p.2).

It is clear from the work of Ingvarson and others, that in order for any system of professional teacher standards to raise quality, there must be a strong commitment from the profession to this system. In the Australian context, there is no doubt that a large majority of the profession accept the need to maintain professional standards, although there is some uncertainty about the extent to which they believe that an externally imposed framework of standards that are tied to a performance management system will work.

This issue is amply illustrated by an evaluation study of a pilot project conducted by Education Queensland that trialled the use of professional standards for teachers (Mayer, Mitchell, Macdonald & Bell, 2005). The pilot project aimed to give teachers opportunities to "engage with a set of professional standards as a framework for professional learning" (Mayer et al., 2005, p.159). Moreover, it was found that "the standards and their use as a tool to support professional learning were strongly endorsed by the participants in the pilot" (p.173).

However, although the authors themselves are generally optimistic about the role that a framework of standards can play in professional learning, there are a number of critical points that arose out of the evaluation:

1. An acknowledgement of the potential shortfalls associated with standards frameworks that regulate teachers' work in ways that reduce their autonomy, or that assume that assessment of teachers' work will necessarily lead to improved teaching and thus improved learning outcomes for students (p.163).
2. An indication that a number of participants articulated their scepticism about standards and possible implications for their work, with some saying that they were only participating in the trial process because they had been asked to by their principals (p. 166).
3. Engagement with the standards during the pilot period was sustained by, amongst other things, regular face-to-face contact with the pilot project team and colleagues, support and recognition from school administrators, and school-based critical friends. On the other hand, factors that constrained engagement included, limited interest shown by colleagues, and the lack of *time* for proper engagement because of the intensive nature of teachers' work (pp.170-171). (my emphasis)
4. Importantly, this issue of *time*, and the lack of it, was raised several times in the pilot evaluation:
 - a. "There was some evidence that the professional standards for teachers could be used as a framework for planning and structuring professional learning, particularly in those cases where teachers had the *time* and support to use the standards" (p.173). (my emphasis)
 - b. "Lack of *time* was consistently mentioned by participants as the main factor that limited engagement and networking" (p.173) (my emphasis)
 - c. "While participants reported that their engagement with the pilot and the standards supported their learning, the evaluation also demonstrated that this engagement was typically undocumented and that the hoped for engagement with colleagues was difficult to sustain because of pressures of *time*" (p. 176). (my emphasis)

Thus it would seem that, as suggested above, there is an acceptance that a framework of teacher professional standards has value for professional development and learning, but there is a strong need for a fuller teacher involvement and ownership of these standards. Moreover, it is not clear from the research that the gap between rhetoric and reality can be easily filled, especially in light of a number of issues: firstly the perceived value or non-value of standards across all curriculum areas, and the question of whether discrete-style standards can validly measure creativity and non-traditional forms of expression; secondly, is 'ownership' of standards really a simple matter to achieve?; and thirdly, will the issue of a

lack of time and intensification of work brought about by increased external pressure on already heavy workloads, as discussed above, be taken seriously by central bureaucracies?

The last issue of time in particular has been well-researched within broader studies of work intensification for educators - for example, see Anderson, Johnson and Saha (2002) for a study of the work pressures of 2075 academics across 12 Australian universities. Indeed, work intensification coupled with 'time-starvation' are a reality of much of modern life, but there does seem to be a need for more acknowledgement and consideration of the direct relationship between the institutionalisation of standards and the work of increasingly 'time-starved' teachers, and how this might be affecting quality issues.

Linked to this issue of time, Comber and Nixon (2009) in a study of the work of teachers from 10 schools in low socio-economic communities of South Australia, found recurrent themes about 'more and less', "doing more with less support and fewer resources, and doing more without a sense of purpose or worthwhile outcome as 'time, precious time, that could be spent in reflecting and observing and creating' instead is spent on 'standardised column reporting' " (p. 340).

Similarly, other research has reported that when teachers do feel that their work levels have been and are being intensified to such high levels, they may then do just enough to 'get by' (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 10). This form of counter-resistance is, more often than not, a hidden element in teacher behaviour, as teachers quietly go about their day to day work and silently sabotage centralised efforts at reform (Tuinamua 2007; Webb, 2006).

Discourse of the New Managerialism/Performativity

The 'new managerialism' in education is a form of management that emphasises efficiency and effectiveness using techniques and values appropriated from the business sector. It functions in support of a neo-liberal economic agenda (Sultana, 2005; Apple, 2001; Smyth, 2006; Hartley, 1997) and appropriates the technicist language typically used in the business sector. The following example, from Australia, quite vividly demonstrates this issue:

... there has been an increasingly 'taken-for-granted' assumption that managerial principles and entrepreneurial strategies are the means to revitalise schooling. Indeed, the language - one of the central components of an ideology - of educational reform is heavily infused with terms derived directly from the business sector. There is an overall perception - often expressed as 'just common sense' - that schools should be more like businesses ... even to the extent, as recently advocated by the Minister in New South Wales, of allowing corporate advertising on school uniforms (Cocklin 1992:246).

The Cocklin (1992) example, is particularly interesting in that many of the assumptions that he writes about in 1992 have, as discussed above, become even more entrenched in education discourses today.

The effect of this form of managerialism on the work of teachers has been strongly felt in the push for increased accountability. As discussed, this need for accountability and the production of 'evidence' of quality could be seen as a necessary part of a professionalism for teachers. However, as Comber and Nixon (2009) report, many of the teachers that they worked with "spoke of ways in which their work was shaped by the corporate discourses of 'reform' and 'quality' associated with standardised testing, the quantification of 'quality', and the disciplinary discourses of surveillance and policing which resulted in their having to complete and lodge endless forms and records" (p.339). This over-regulation and auditing of teachers' work has been noted in many settings; they point to increased concerns about how the imposition of a framework of teacher professional standards linked in with accountability measures might impact negatively on the 'quality' that they are designed to effect in practice (Thomas, 2008).

Moreover, the new managerialism is seen as a way to devolve responsibility (ie. power), at a very superficial level, to schools and practitioners. Thus, in this situation practitioners might attain a sense of ‘empowerment’, whereas in reality the real control and power remains at centralised locations. In this sense, within the new management, there is now a ‘new’ form of employee involvement, in what Ball (1998:123) calls the cultivation of ‘corporate culture’.... a development which is “deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, they represent a move away from Taylorist, ‘low trust’ methods of employee control. Managerial responsibilities are delegated and initiative and problem solving are highly valued. On the other hand, new forms of surveillance and self-monitoring are put in place, e.g. appraisal systems, target setting, and output comparisons” (ibid.).

Additionally, some of the research on standards has shown that there is a real dilemma between a desire for ‘quality’, and a growing awareness that institutionalising standards in particular ways may not always bring about this quality. For example, Bloomfield (2006) uses a policy-as-discourse approach to show that, in Australia, the new policy directions towards standards and accountability brings into sharp relief a ‘paradoxical dilemma’ that is confronting education systems globally (p. 2). This paradox juxtaposes two demands of teacher education: one is the “need to provide a supply of passionate, innovative, flexible, context-responsive teachers capable of functioning as creative knowledge producers”, who at the same time can “satisfy the demands of a political and policy climate that favours consistency, effectiveness and accountability” (ibid.).

Bloomfield’s (2006) analysis shows that recent educational policy developments in Australia within the area of teaching standards emerging from the 2000 Ramsey review of teacher education construct particular ways of viewing the role of the teacher vis-a-vis expectations of quality and professionalism. Thus standards are presented as “frameworks of professional guidance and statements of expertise”, but at the same time act as “technologies of control employed in the service of accountability” (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 6).

The danger inherent in this situation is that, instead of helping teachers to achieve the type of professionalism advocated by reports such as the 2000 Ramsey Review in Australia, the “increasing demands to be publicly ‘calculated’ will induce on a daily basis in teachers’ lives responses that align more closely to ‘getting by’ than to the revitalisation of a profession that the Ramsey Report claims is needed” (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 10). This type of behaviour has also been referred to as ‘playing the game’ of being a teacher within their own boundaries, yet remaining fully aware of the external expectations of desired behaviour (Tuinamuna, 2007). In a study of teachers in the US, Webb (2006) also noted similar responses to increased accountability, saying that “teachers’ fabrications were created to respond to the flow of surveillance used to monitor them” (p.206).

Discourse of ‘Strategic Manoeuvring’

Some of the research that this study examined seemed to be working along the lines of a discourse of ‘strategic manoeuvring’ in that it seemed to say, ‘standards are here to stay, and there does seem to be some value in having them: how can we work within or around these dominant discourses?’

Anderson (2004), in citing Foucault (1980, p.101), suggests that discourses can be “a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p.198). As a way to start an opposing strategy, Anderson (2004) wonders whether it is at all possible to ‘attack’ the new managerialism by cooperating in the “development and dissemination of arguments that operate within the managerial discourse that they seek to overturn.... [utilising] this discourse in order to advance arguments against managerialism” (p.198). In this way, she continues, it may be possible to “invoke the economic rationalist

discourse that underpins managerialism in order to demonstrate that managerialism in universities is counterproductive, ineffective and uneconomic” (p.198).

There is a danger, of course, that immersing oneself in the dominant managerial discourse allows it to begin to shape one’s subjectivities, and that like neoliberalism “it has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). In other words, it is possible that we too may become embedded in the managerial discourse and performativity expectations. Nonetheless, the discourse of ‘strategic manoeuvring’ was evident in some of the research on standards, and although this strategising rarely proceeded to a significant level of ‘resistance’ (Anderson, 2004), it did seem to be pushed along by a pragmatism borne of experience of previous reform measures. As an example, teacher educators Harris, Moran and Long (2010) report on a project where they ‘respond’ to the NSWIT professional teaching standards by integrating them with their programmes:

“Contested discourse notwithstanding, professional standards are now mandatory and are with us for the foreseeable future.... The enormous challenge confronting TEIs, then, is to operate within the standards framework, through a diversity of methods that enhance professional learning, while simultaneously encouraging creativity” (p. 44).

Their research reports on the establishment of a ‘Teaching and Learning Consortium’ (TLC) that created a partnership between local schools and the HEI, and which combined school-based and campus-based learning. In evaluating the programme they found that “the TLC model has the capacity to meet the demands of both the accreditation and effective pedagogy positions” (p. 40).

Although it is not clear whether this research was working along the lines of an ‘attack’ of the ideology of the new managerialism (Anderson, 2004), and its effects on the work of teachers, it does exemplify the pragmatic stance that some educators have taken in regards to the imposition of the teacher professional standards in Australia.

Conclusion

Depicting the need for teacher professional standards as ‘commonsense’ is very similar to the appeals made to ‘quality’, ‘excellence’ and ‘world-standard’ that populate much of the managerial-style policy documentation across the globe (Thomas, 2008; Hartley, 1997; Tuinamuana, 2005). In this understanding, standards are seen as neutral, value-free constructs that are fairly straightforward in what they define: what teachers should know, understand and be able to do.

At first glance, this understanding of standards as applied to the teaching profession does seem to make sense. But as has been discussed in this paper, teacher standards are part of a wider, more complex web of factors that impact in significant ways upon the work of teachers, and the learning that happens in schools. The four discourses of standards discussed above, along with the linked research studies, show that in working to understand the various debates, we also need to analyse the ideological underpinnings to these debates. Standing back and considering alternative discourses opens up spaces for contestation of ‘commonsense’ understandings about teacher professional standards, and also assists in re-directing our focus to issues that really matter for education and schooling in our various communities (Alexander, 2010; Comber & Nixon, 2009).

Finally, in a speech to Victorian principals in November 2010 on test-driven accountability, Brian Caldwell says that the issue today is not about testing per se, but about the “purposes that are served and the impact of the testing and reporting regimes” (p.6). Similarly, this paper has tried to show through an analysis of the debates on standards that “it

is not the standards per se, but the uses to which they are put that should be the central policy issue” (Mayer et al., 2005, p.159). Questioning these uses and the consequent impact on the work of teachers and teacher educators will perhaps help to unmask some of the unintended effects of an institutionalised framework of teacher professional standards on the ‘quality’ of our education systems, allowing a more critical engagement with alternative discourses.

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