

12-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Leonard, S. N. (2012). Professional Conversations: Mentor Teachers' Theories-in-Use Using the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(12).  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n12.7>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol37/iss12/5>

## **Professional Conversations: Mentor Teachers' Theories-in-Use Using the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers**

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*Abstract: In this paper the written feedback provided by mentor teachers using a new assessment model for preservice teacher professional experience deployed in the Australian Capital Territory and based on the Australian National Standards for Teachers is analysed. The analysis reveals mentor teachers hold a pervasive theory-in-use in regards to the needs of beginning teachers that may restrict the developmental ambition of the assessment model. The restricted vision of what is important for beginning teachers held by mentor teachers is possibly a reaction to continual change within school education. The analysis is preceded by a description of the 'Professional Conversations' model for mentoring preservice and early career teachers.*

The National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011b) were adopted by the Australian Ministers for Education in 2011 as the basis for registration of all teachers, and as a key component of the approval of Initial Teacher Education Programs within Australia. Promoted as a key benefit of the new standards was the notion that it would 'provide an ongoing basis for teacher reflection and development and... a guide to professional learning' (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011a). That is, the new National Standards were and are promoted as a tool to assist teacher professional development over and above a mechanism for regulating teaching practice or teacher behaviour. The first Australian jurisdiction to move to using the new National Standards in a substantial way was the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) where the two local initial teacher education providers and the new registration authority, the ACT Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) worked closely together to develop a *Professional Conversations Model* for using the National Standards within preservice school-based professional experience. The ambition of this model is to use the National Standards as developmental standards rather than regulatory standards. An analysis of the feedback provided to preservice teachers by mentor teachers, however, suggests that there is still work to do in realising this ambition that will require a deeper inclusion of mentor teachers in the professional conversation.

Within the Australian federal system, school education is a state or territory responsibility with national approaches being achieved only through the agreement of the governments of the six state and two self-governing territories, as well as the Federal Government ('the Commonwealth') who have the major responsibility for funding. At the time of adopting a national standards framework, the ACT was the only Australian jurisdiction to have no existing teacher registration system. In establishing a teacher registration system it simply adopted the new National Framework and, without need for transition, become the first jurisdiction to do so. For teachers in the ACT the adoption of these standards is just one of a number of national initiatives being implemented concurrently with a capacity to fundamentally change their practice. For example, a long held tradition of school-based curriculum development, only quite recently focussed by a jurisdiction

curriculum framework, is now being pushed firmly aside by the Australian Curriculum. Similarly, the recent adoption of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has been a bigger transition for ACT teachers than in jurisdictions such as the surrounding New South Wales that had similar assessment programs already in place already at a state level.

An early achievement for the new registration authority, the TQI, was to gain the cooperation of the two Initial Teacher Education providers in the ACT, the University of Canberra and the Australian Catholic University, to develop a common approach to using the National Standards within their respective school-based professional experience programs. This was initially achieved through a joint pilot project conducted with funding support from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), and involving the two universities and the teachers at five local schools. Building on this project, the two universities continued to work with the TQI to develop a common approach to professional experience that was named the *Professional Conversations Model*. Before moving to an analysis of the major work product of teachers within the professional experience program, the next section will be used to outline the major features and rationale of the model.

### **The Professional Conversations Model**

The *Professional Conversations Model* promotes the use of the National Professional Standards for Teachers as developmental standards. Mahony and Hextall (2000) discriminate between ‘developmental’ and ‘regulatory’ standards noting that standards can be used as regulatory tools to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of systems, institutions and individuals; or they can provide approaches for teachers’ further professional learning aimed at improving the quality of their teaching throughout their career. International and domestic experience has shown that within the prevailing audit culture (Power, 2009), teacher standards have often been implemented in the regulatory sense (Sachs, 2003b). However there is little evidence to support a claim that a regulatory approach actually improves student learning, while there is significant evidence that a regulatory implementation of standards can have de-professionalising effects on teachers (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009; Sachs, 2003b), and that these effects can be linked to teacher dissatisfaction and workforce attrition (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009).

In contrast, a developmental approach to standards is consistent with strong evidence on the types of teacher behaviour and practice that lead to high student performance. The *Professional Conversations Model* draws on this evidence base. It addresses the findings from the *Productive Pedagogies* research (Hayes, Lingard, Mills, & Christie, 2006), the most extensive Australian study linking teacher practices with student learning, that the ‘purpose and structure of field experiences’ in teacher education ‘centre too often on practising teaching techniques with relatively little concern for what is being taught and the quality of learning produced’ (Gore, Griffiths, & Ladwig, 2004). Professional experience within this model is understood as an opportunity for professional learning by all involved, and not simply an opportunity for university students to ‘practice’ teaching techniques, with the National Standards providing a starting point for that learning.

This approach is consistent with Shulman & Shulman’s (2004, 2008) frame for conceptualising teacher learning and development within communities and contexts, and takes account of their findings that the ability to ‘adapt and learn from experience’ is of paramount importance in the everyday practice of teaching (Shulman & Shulman, 2004, p. 263). The model also draws on evidence of the powerful impact ‘problem-based teaching’ has on student learning (Hattie, 2009) as has been seen in projects such as the New South Wales *Priority Action Schools Program* (Beveridge, Groundwater-Smith, Kemmis, &

Watson, 2005). A central learning goal within the *Professional Conversations Model* is to develop skills in the critical analysis of practice, vision and beliefs, and in the ongoing formative evaluation of teaching and learning. Within this conceptual framework, the National Standards are used as a set of cues for critical investigation and evaluation, and not simply as a set of competencies to be displayed and observed. As such it adopts Sachs' (2003a) notion of an *activist* teaching profession that is collaborative and future oriented.

Framing professional experience in this way places the mentor teacher in the program in an unusual educative role. While they are clearly school-based teacher educators and supervisors of the preservice teacher, in a sense they are also teaching peers and co-investigators in the problem-based teaching asked for in the model. Mentor teachers have a key role in providing feedback to preservice teachers during professional experience, but as teacher-practitioners the feedback they provide can frequently be characterised as feedback from a more experienced peer. Here the *Professional Conversations Model* leans heavily on Hattie's (2011) work on effective feedback and his argument that feedback should address three important questions: 'Where am I going?'; 'How am I going?'; and 'Where to next?' (pg. 116). The model also relies on the associated work of Gan (2011) demonstrating the power that explicit prompts from teachers have in helping peers to provide effective feedback. In this setting, Gan's 'teachers' are the teacher educators, while the 'peers' are the mentor and preservice teachers. Two key documents were produced to scaffold the feedback process during school-based professional experience: *A Guide to Preservice Teacher's Professional Practice* and a set of *Professional Conversations Prompts*. Both documents were based on the National Professional Standards for Teachers.

The *Guide to Preservice Teachers' Professional Practice* is intended to provide mentor teachers with a basis for providing feedback addressing the question of 'Where am I going?' It was developed with the findings from the pilot project in mind that the thirty-seven 'Focus Areas' contained within the seven 'Standards' of the National Standards were too numerous for everyday use. The Guide seeks to provide teachers in schools with a sense of how the professional capabilities of preservice teachers could be expected to develop over the length of their initial teacher education course, using the three domains of the National Standards, Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement, as unifying themes. For example, in the domain of Professional Knowledge, the following guidance is given for students in the middle of their course:

Preservice teachers experiment with approaches to supporting the physical, cultural, social, linguistic and intellectual characteristics influencing the learning of students. They experiment with differentiating their teaching to meet the individual needs of a range of learners in their classes, including the particular learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). They develop lesson plans appropriate to the curriculum area and students. Their lesson plans appropriately align curriculum, assessment & reporting requirements. Preservice teachers begin implementing these lesson plans with their classes. An appropriate grasp of the subject content is demonstrated.

The *Professional Conversations Prompts* follow on from this, providing guiding questions to scaffold professional conversations between and among mentor and preservice teachers across the range of teacher knowledge, capabilities and practices identified in the National Standards. In the domain of Professional Practice, for example, prompts for mentor teachers to address the question of 'How am I Going?' include:

- How did the resources you used enhance the learning experience?
- Which communication strategies worked best to engage the students?
- What were the effective elements in the planning and implementation of the learning experience?

And prompts for preservice teachers include:

- How do you feel the students responded to the learning sequence?
- Did I choose the most appropriate assessment strategies and was my feedback instructive to the students' learning?
- How did I go with meeting the learning needs of the Indigenous learners in the class?

Prompts for Mentor Teacher to address the question of 'Where to next?' include:

- What resources will you need...?
- What communication strategies might support student engagement?

While prompts for preservice teachers include:

- Have you ever...?(e.g. challenging behaviours/circumstances)
- What advice do you have about moderating assessment tasks and making good use of assessment data?

Similar prompts are offered in the other domains as well as prompts to support a more general analysis of professional practice.

A final element of the *Professional Conversations Model* is the professional experience report. The report in use moves away from competencies-based models that are often associated with standards-based approaches and is, instead, used primarily as an additional layer of feedback. The report is also structured around the three domains of the National Standards, with a section to address 'How am I Going?' feedback headed 'Evidence of Development,' and a section to address 'Where to Next?' feedback, headed 'Focus for Future Development.' It is acknowledged that professional learning in school-based setting is opportunistic and that the chance to address or explore every Focus Area within the National Standards may not occur in every professional experience placement. Students are, however, expected to actively seek out opportunities to develop knowledge on every Focus Area during their course and demonstrate this learning through a portfolio of evidence.

### **Analysis of the 'Professional Conversations' Professional Experience Reports**

In a significant departure from the 'rubric of competencies' style reports they replaced, the professional experience reports adopted in the *Professional Conversations* model effectively posed the three domains of the National Standards as open ended questions. As such, they provide an opportunity to investigate what aspects, what parts, and what relations within the National Standards are discerned and focused on by mentor teachers. The reports are a work product of mentor teachers produced as part of their employment by the University. As such, the individual permission of the authors of the reports was not required for evaluation and research purposes. The analysis carried out here is of the consolidated texts meaning no individual preservice teacher, mentor teacher or school can be identified. For the analysis 33 professional experience reports, representing 20% of the enrolled student cohort, were randomly selected from a professional experience placement typically taken by students in the third and penultimate year of the undergraduate teacher education course. The reports were written by teachers in early childhood, primary, middle, and special school settings including some placements in specialist roles such as teacher librarian. Reflecting the overall participation in pre-service professional experience, 85% of the mentor teachers worked in government school settings. All but three of the professional experience placements were in ACT schools, with the three exceptions being in nearby New South Wales schools.

### **Methodology**

The professional experience reports were analysed using a process of computer-

assisted phenomenography to develop a description of mentor teachers' representation of the domains of teaching practice as set out in the National Standards through attending to dominant features of the report texts. Text from the reports was de-identified and consolidated to a single document. The consolidated text was analysed using *Leximancer* software. *Leximancer* conducts a two stage analysis of text; first a semantic analysis identifying 'concepts' within the text by building a thesaurus of words used with similar intent, and then a relational analysis identifying how concepts are used in relation to each other within the text. The *Leximancer* analysis is grounded entirely in the text and not on researcher-driven interpretive coding. It reports 'concepts' when words are used frequently, and connects them when particular words are frequently used in close proximity with other particular words. In the default settings, proximity is within two sentence blocks of analysis. The technique is based on the observations of 'corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, and psycholinguistics that word co-occurrence statistics in natural language are a rich source of information that correlates with certain aspects of human language learning, comprehension, and performance' (Smith & Humphreys, 2006, p. 265).

*Leximancer* has been shown to have high face validity in that its analysis is stable and reproducible when working repeatedly with the same texts (Smith & Humphreys, 2006, pp. 265-270). Work on correlative validity of *Leximancer*, that is how the stand alone *Leximancer* analysis compares to other (human) analytical methods, remains limited largely because examples of validated human-coded inductive rather than deductive analyses for comparison are rare (Smith & Humphreys, 2006, p. 274). In the more realistic situation of *Leximancer* being used to assist rather than replace human analysis, however, the technique has been found to have high functional validity and has been used for similar purposes as in the present study such as tracking changing themes and concepts over time in an academic journal (Cretchley, Rooney, & Gallois, 2010) and identifying communication patterns between medical staff in a complex environment (Hewett, Watson, Gallois, Ward, & Leggett, 2009). In these studies an alternative methodology such as grounded theory may have identified different initial concepts that the *Leximancer* analysis due to the researcher relying on previous practical and theoretical knowledge, however the opportunity for researcher interpretation is not lost as the researchers continued to work with the text following the *Leximancer* analysis. In a comparison of a phenomenographic study using manual and automatic coding using *Leximancer*, Penn-Edwards (2010) found the automatic analysis to be more efficacious in that the researcher 'was able to deal with large amounts of data without [coding] bias, identify a broader span of syntactic properties, increase reliability, and facilitate reproducibility' (p. 253).

The results of the *Leximancer* analysis are available in statistical form or as a concept map. For this project separate concept maps were produced of mentor teacher comment made under the heading 'Evidence of Development,' and of mentor teacher comment made under the heading 'Focus for Future Development.' These are reproduced at Figure 1 and Figure 2 respectively. The concept maps provide a two-dimensional representation of the co-occurrence of concepts within the entire text. As an overlay to this, *Leximancer* groups concepts into 'themes' using circles to group the concepts and suggesting a name for the theme from within the grouped concepts. The sensitivity of the identification of themes is set by the researcher so while the concept map in Figure 1 shows the concepts grouped in five themes, this could be reformed to a higher or lower number. Similarly the themes can be renamed by the researcher. These are interpretive and heuristic decisions for the researcher. The size of these circles represent the strength of the theme in the text; that is a large circle indicate that the theme occurs frequently within the text. The concept map also uses lines to shows specific connections between pairs of concepts both within and beyond the theme circles.

Once these themes, concepts and relations have been identified, the text is then manually inspected to determine how concepts were intended. For example, it was found that

the reports that the word of 'time' was being used in both a technical sense of time spent on particular activities, and in an affective sense of the value of time in the classroom. Specific words can be manually suppressed as concepts or themes to eliminate words used simply as a function of language such as 'and' or 'the' and this has occurred for the concept maps in this paper. Another reason to suppress words as concepts is when they are used with high frequency to tag context. In the concepts maps at Figures 1 and 2, the word 'name' appears as the central concept in the text as 'name' used as a generic substitute in place of the proper names of the preservice teachers in phrases such as '[Name] demonstrated excellent planning...'. The suppression of 'name' was considered, but it was determined by the researcher that it actually represented a key element of the text in that the mentor teachers tended to discuss the role of the named preservice teacher in relation to other themes of lessons, students, classroom environment and professional behaviour almost independently of each other

The *Leximancer* analysis was then used to assist a phenomenographic analysis of the texts. Phenomenography was chosen following Marton's (1988) argument that epistemology reveals ontology, that differences in how we understand a phenomenon are visible in 'what aspects, what parts, what relations are discerned and focused on' (Marton, 1988, pp. 3-4). In this study the aspects that mentor teachers focus on and the relationships they articulate are used to make visible their understandings of the Domains of the National Standards, at least as they pertain to beginning teachers. As the analysis is of text provided by many teachers, the understandings revealed are not purely idiosyncratic but show a discourse of mentoring new teachers.

Given the nature and use of the professional experience reports, it is contended that the discourse revealed represents a 'theory-in-use' (Giddens, 1984) in the context of mentoring beginning teachers that may vary from the espoused theory (Argyris & Schon, 1978) of both the institutions involved such as the schools, the universities and Teacher Quality Institute, and possibly the espoused theory of the mentor teachers themselves. Professional Experience reports are written as part of the grading of preservice teachers. In the reporting format used in recent years in the ACT and by most Australian universities, teachers were asked to indicate the preservice teacher's progress against a fairly broad set of competencies by ticking a rubric. In the *Professional Conversations* model, however, the mentor teachers were asked to report against just three domains and use the list of competencies to create a more holistic report. In doing this, the mentor teachers had the power to focus on the aspects of professional practice that they saw as most important. Professional experience reports are 'private' in the sense that they are written for use solely within a field-of-practice of teacher education in the sense used by Bourdieu (1977/1972 tr). These reports are not shared with the broader school community, nor are they used within public and professional debates about quality teaching. They are used exclusively within a field of teacher education involving the mentor teachers, university teaching staff, preservice teachers, and teacher recruiters who may be school principals or may be specialist human resources staff. Teachers may reveal different understandings of the Domains of the National Standards, and the nature of teaching, in different contexts and the analysis here cannot be extended beyond this context without further research. Equally though, any differences found between the discourse revealed in the reports and the official discourse of the standards themselves is important in understanding the multiple influences in play within the field of teacher education.

In conducting the phenomenographic analysis, the reports were evaluated with reference to the National Professional Standards for Teachers against which the reports were framed, as well with reference to the Productive Pedagogies research (Hayes et al., 2006) that was at the base of the professional learning programs in use at the schools involved for several years before these placements. Reference was also made to Hattie's (2011, p. 116) model of feedback. Hattie's model suggests that feedback should address three questions:

‘Where am I going?’; ‘How am I Going?’; and ‘Where to next?’ In the context of the professional experience report, the ‘Where am I going?’ question is predefined by the Focus Areas in the National Standards. For evaluation purposes, the comments made under the heading ‘Evidence of Development’ were seen to correlate to the feedback question ‘How am I going?’, while the comments made under the heading ‘Focus for Future Development’ were seen to correlate to the feedback question ‘Where to next?’ Hattie’s model further argues that feedback in relation to any of these questions can occur at the levels of task, process, self-regulation, and self. Feedback at the level of ‘self’ often occurs as praise and while it does occur in the this text, it is generally in introductory remarks that do not have a strong presence in shaping the major concepts identified in the text. Overall, the texts also had very few examples of self-regulatory feedback.

Differentiating task-focussed and processed-focussed feedback from the concept maps was achieved by comparing the position of the concepts in relation to other concepts. Where the feedback simply identifies that a focus area was being or still needed to be demonstrated, that is the feedback was completely task-focussed, the relevant concepts appear in relatively isolated positions in the map; the strongest example being the concept of *parents*. Where process level feedback is present, the relevant concepts are clustered and connected, for example the clustered concepts that can be seen around ‘teaching’ such as ‘planning’, ‘strategies’, and ‘appropriate - content’. This approach sets a relatively low threshold for ‘process’ feedback in the sense that the text does not, by and large, articulate a high level of specific processes or activity. It is likely that more specific feedback was offered orally in most cases.

## Analysis

Phenomenography is an iterative methodology and so the following analysis and discussion will shift between description to interpretation. In doing this, the terms ‘concept’ and ‘theme’ are used exclusively to describe the results of the *Leximancer* analysis with each term being described in the preceding methodology. The terms ‘discourse’ and ‘theory-in-use’ are used when describing the researcher’s interpretations derived through phenomenographic analysis.

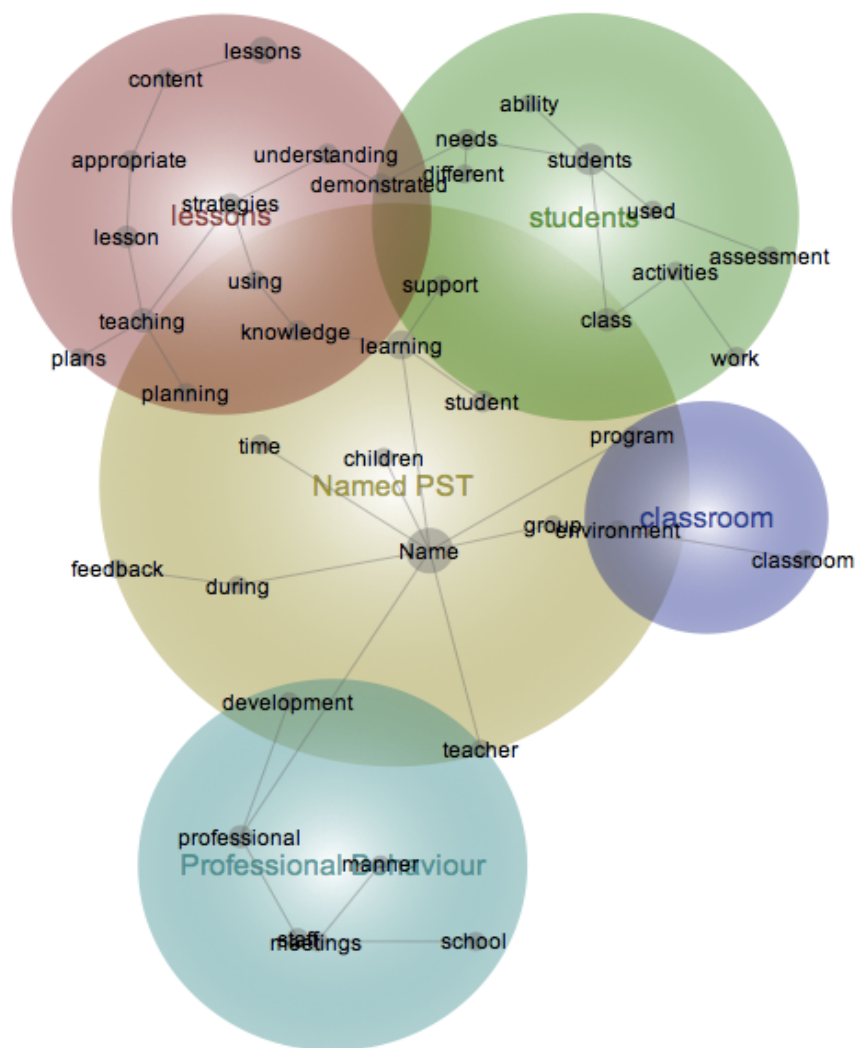
When describing the Evidence of Development, or providing feedback in the ‘How am I going?’ mode, some clear themes emerge as can be seen in the concept map in Figure 1. The central theme, clustered on the concept *Name* results from the preservice teacher’s actual name being replaced by the generic ‘Name’ prior to the analysis. The central position then is as would be expected in a report that is written about a particular named person. The other major ideas that emerge are the overlapping themes of *Students* and *Lessons*, as well as the less connected theme of *Classroom Environment* and the quite distant theme of *Professional Behaviour*.

Within the overlapping themes at the top of the map we see a series of interrelated concepts. This positioning indicates that these concepts are being used together regularly within the text. Starting with the theme *students* we see that in their feedback, the mentor teachers emphasise that school students have different needs and abilities and that the preservice teachers are typically providing activities, work and assessment to support those different needs. The following text segment reflects this cluster of concepts well:

She readily identifies and assistes [sic] students who have difficulties with classroom tasks. Her awareness of their individual needs was evident in her comments, questions and the individual assistance she gave to those students. She is aware of extra planning and different activities needed to facilitate their learning.



The theme of *Lessons* contains the concepts of plans and planning, appropriate content, and knowledge of strategies to support student learning. It is notable here that the concept of ‘knowledge’ is clearly associated with ‘strategies,’ and not with ‘content.’ It is also notable that the word content is used in preference to curriculum, with the latter being used almost exclusively only to name the Australian Curriculum when it is used throughout this set of reports. The term pedagogy is completely absent from the reports with the theme *Lessons* appearing on the concept map as the link between *Teaching* and *Students*. The semantic choice here is not trivial but shows a particular focus on teacher behaviour and technical skill epitomised by statements such as ‘[Name] has demonstrated an ability to

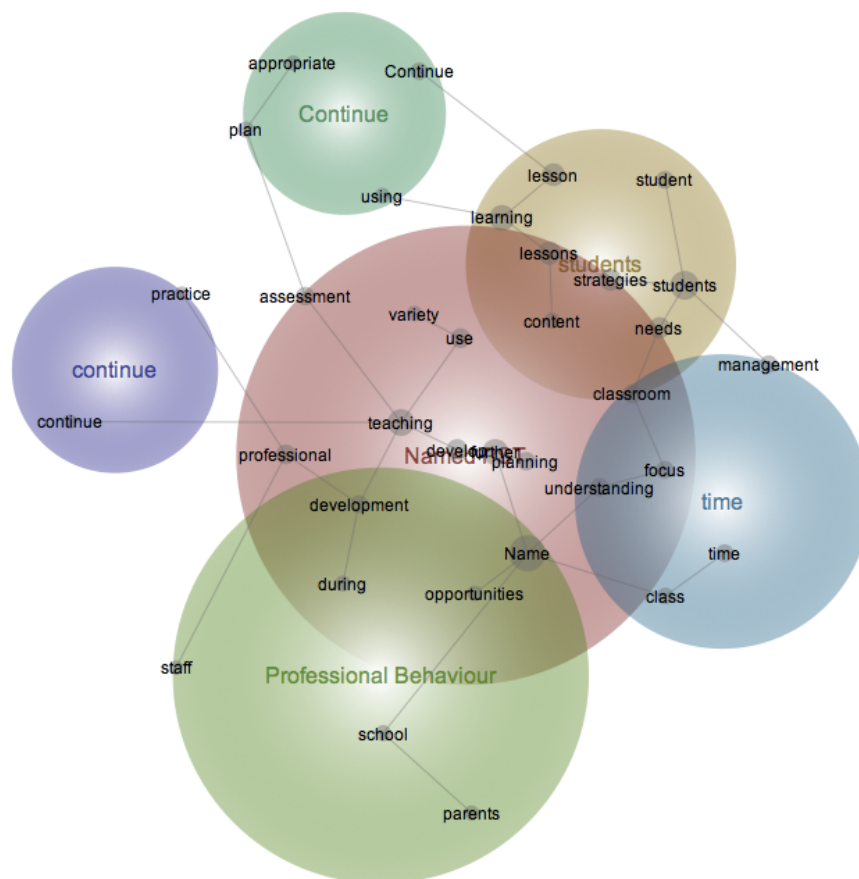


**Figure 1: Concept map of combined feedback text in ‘Evidence of Development’**

understand how students learn through her detailed planning of lessons and through their implementation is able to confidently teach the content.’ Even allowing that we are looking at reports about the activities of preservice teachers, the model of teaching and learning that underpins the feedback given here is highly teacher-centred, does not articulate the teacher as having a role in curriculum, and equates learning with well planned and implemented lessons. The open-ended approach of the *Professional Conversations* model does allow for a more expansive and diverse discussion of the practice of teaching. As such, through the discourse evident in these texts, the mentor teachers are revealing a theory-in-use that some aspects of the National Standards are more important than others.

Positioned with proximity to the *Students* theme, *Classroom Environments* is also associated with the preservice teacher's name through statements such as '[Name] understands the importance of providing a safe learning environment'. In virtually all statements relating to the *Classroom Environment* theme, a safe or quality learning environment is presented as a result of teacher behaviour such as 'providing the students with ongoing feedback and encouragement'. Notably there is not a single instance of classroom environment being discussed in direct connection to student learning.

Completely removed from the themes of *Lessons* and *Students* is the theme of *Professional Behaviour*. This separation is, in part, driven by the structure of the report as virtually all comments collected within this theme are made in response to the third Domain in the National Standards, Professional Engagement. Notwithstanding this, the separation is significant as there is not a similar separation driven by a differentiation of the other two domains of 'Professional Knowledge' and 'Professional Practice.' It is also notable that the word 'professional' is not used in reporting on the first two domains except in either naming the domain or, in one instance, 'maintaining a professional manner with students.' Again the theory-in-use is quite clear in that engagement in staff meetings, an appropriate or professional manner, and professional development are all acknowledged as important; but these activities are not articulated in connection to student learning. The following text is typical of this theme: '[Name] is enthusiastic to participate in both formal and informal meetings. She has attended Professional Development sessions with the school staff and is consistent in her professional manner when communicating with parents, carers and the community.'



**Figure 2: Concept map of combined feedback text in ‘Focus for Future Development’ section**

A separate concept map generated from the Focus for Further Development text is almost identical to the Evidence of Development concept map and is provided at Figure 2. The feedback mentors provide here essentially emphasise the same concepts: that preservice teachers should continue to develop and practice their skills in planning and implementing appropriate lessons through strategies that meet the different needs of students. The different concepts that do emerge in this feedback are ‘variety’, ‘time’ and ‘parents’. In a few instances, the concept of ‘variety’ is used in relation to furthering knowledge of the diversity of student needs, but mostly it appears in relation to encouraging the adoption of a variety of teaching or presentation strategies. As discussed earlier, the concept of ‘time’ is used in relation to both the timing within lessons and the mostly affective value of spending more time with students. The concept of ‘parents’ appears essentially as advice to seek out opportunities to engage with parents in future placements.

## Discussion

The theories-in-use evident in the professional experience reports are quite different to the espoused and ‘official’ theories of professional role of the teacher found in both the National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011a) against which the reports were framed. It is also different to the espoused theory that underpins the *Quality Teaching Model* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003) which is based on the Productive Pedagogies framework (Hayes et al., 2006) and had been the official reference point for all teacher professional learning in the government schools involved in this program for several years before the introduction of the

National Standards. Working systematically through the domains of the National Standards demonstrates the difference. The focus areas that are prioritised or ignored within the professional experience reports are summarised in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

### Domain of Professional Knowledge

The understandings of Professional Knowledge evident in the reports were significantly conflated with understandings of Professional Practice. Dominating the feedback in this domain were statements relating to Focus Areas 2.1 and 2.2 regarding the organisation of content. In many reports the comments made actually refer to the organisation of teaching rather than content, which is addressed in the National Standards in focus area 3.2 which is in the domain of Professional Practice. Typical of the feedback that did refer specifically to content is '[Name engaged in] careful planning and sequencing of lesson content which is linked with the curriculum.' This feedback is essentially at the *task* level with little or no reference to the *processes* by which this was done. There are frequent statements that content should be 'appropriate', but no articulation of how appropriateness is determined such as organising content based on a pedagogical rationale (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Shulman, 2001; Shulman, 1987), or to address factors like *intellectual depth* or relevance found in the *Quality Teaching Model*. In the one instance it is reported that the preservice teacher was organising content into 'themes,' but even here the themes appear to be an end in themselves and are not articulated as a way, for example, to build *knowledge integration* as encouraged by the *Quality Teaching Model*.

Focus Areas 1.1 and 1.5, relating to the characteristics of students and the need to differentiate learning to meet those needs, were also discussed in almost all reports. Indeed if the feedback from this group of teachers were to be summed up in one piece of advice it would be that 'all students are different.' The feedback on how to deal with these differences, however, once focussed on *task* level feedback. While it is highly likely that significant levels of verbal guidance and co-planning have gone on within the professional experience to address differentiation, there is no evidence of the connection between evaluation and planning that is called for in Focus Areas 2.3 and 3.6 of the Standards. That is to say that the discourse on how to approach different learning needs appears based on ensuring a rotation of a variety of teaching and presentation approaches.

The structure of the reports within this model asked teachers to work at the domain level and comment on the different Focus Areas within the Standards as the opportunity arose. Within each domain this translated to some Focus Areas being almost or completely ignored by all mentor teachers in the sample group. Within the domain of Professional Knowledge, while individual difference is discussed at length, cultural and linguistic difference is virtually absent in all of the reports. In the entire sample there are only three reports that make any reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Two of these mentions are passing reference are simply quoting the relevant statement in the Standards, while the one substantial comment made positions Indigenous students as peripheral to the core concerns of the classroom teacher: 'Opportunities to observe Aboriginal and Torres Strait students came in the form of the established Homework Centre and through resolution of playground incidents.'

Mention of cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic background is also limited, and when it does occur it is in relation to 'getting to know' the children. Here the distance between parents and teaching and students on the concept map is telling; it is apparent that the mentor teachers do not see parents and community as an important source of professional knowledge.

<b><i>Frequent Feedback</i></b>
---------------------------------

1.1 Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area 2.2 Content selection and organization
<b><i>Some Feedback</i></b> 2.5 Literacy and numeracy strategies
<b><i>Little or No Feedback</i></b> 1.2 Understand how students learn 1.3 Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds 1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students 1.6 Strategies to support full participation of students with disability 2.3 Curriculum, assessment and reporting 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians 2.6 Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

**Table 1: Priority of feedback relating to different Focus Areas in the domain of Professional Knowledge**

### Domain of Professional Practice

As with the domain of Professional Knowledge, the feedback in these reports regarding Professional Practice is almost universally focussed on just a few of the Focus Areas in the National Standards. Indeed the key discourse begun in the domain of Professional Knowledge is essentially continued in the discussion of the domain of Professional Practice; excepting that where good planning and the use of various and appropriate strategies was positioned as the way to deal with different student learning needs in the former, the same performances seem to also be the solution to dealing with challenging student behaviour in the later. Notably though, many mentor teachers were able to name specific behaviour management strategies used, although specific strategies for differentiating teaching were rarely named and so it is in behaviour management more than anywhere else that feedback is clearly at a *process* level.

In this domain what remains silent is again pertinent. For example, virtually the only times teaching resources and ICT are mentioned are in relation to each other with the internet is seen as a source of resources. Never mentioned, however, are the use of processes of identifying appropriate resources. Similarly, the heavy emphasis on behaviour management draws further attention to the silence in regards to engaging student participation. The *Productive Pedagogies* research pointed to the importance for student learning of student self-regulation, the use of explicit criteria for student performance and giving students a voice in the pace and direction of the lesson as key elements in creating a quality learning environment (Gore et al., 2004). In contrast, the feedback provided to preservice teachers here suggests a theory-in-use that beginning teachers can achieve a quality learning environment through performing particular behaviours or strategies such as ‘verbal (counting, reminders) as well as non-verbal (clapping, pointing) communication to ensure focus is maintained.’

<p><b><i>Frequent Feedback</i></b>                      3.2 Plan, structure and sequence learning programs                      3.3 Use teaching strategies                      4.2 Manage classroom activities                      4.3 Manage challenging behavior</p>
<p><b><i>Some Feedback</i></b>                      3.5 Use effective classroom communication                      5.1 Assess student learning                      5.2 Provide feedback to students on their learning</p>
<p><b><i>Little or No Feedback</i></b>                      3.4 Select and use resources                      3.6 Evaluate and improve teaching programs                      3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process                      4.1 Support student participation                      4.4 Maintain student safety                      4.5 Use ICT safely, responsibly and ethically                      5.3 Make consistent and comparable judgements                      5.4 Interpret student data                      5.5 Report on student achievement</p>

**Table 2: Priority of feedback relating to different Focus Areas in the domain of Professional Practice**

### Domain of Professional Engagement

Feedback in this domain was limited. Typically the feedback simply noted students taking the opportunities to address these focus areas, or advised them to look for such opportunities in the future. In some cases this advice seemed aimed at meeting career progression requirements: ‘Continue to seek out professional literature and web-sites which will assist to develop a well-rounded professional portfolio.’ While others did see a connection to student learning: ‘Attendance at professional development is necessary to further her understanding of professional learning which has implications on student learning and achievement.’

The last example notwithstanding, the lack of connection seen between Professional Engagement and student learning is stark and well illustrated on the concept map where the issues of engagement are grouped in the theme of ‘Professional Behaviour’. This suggests a discourse that these engagement behaviours are part of acting ‘professionally,’ but there is virtually no evidence of a belief that such behaviours are actually related to student learning. This lack of connection is in contrast to the resounding message in many studies that engagement behaviours are perhaps the most important thing teachers can do to improve student learning. Hattie argues:

One of the major messages from *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2009) is the power of teachers learning from and talking to each other about planning – learning intentions, success criteria, what is valuable learning, progression, and what it means to be ‘good at’ a subject (Hattie, 2011, p. 116).

<b>Frequent Feedback</b> none
<b>Some Feedback</b> 6.3 Engage with colleagues and improve practice 7.1 Meet professional ethics and responsibilities 7.2 Comply with legislative, administrative and organisational requirements 7.3 Engage with the parents/carers
<b>Little or No Feedback</b> 6.1 Identify and plan professional learning needs 6.2 Engage in professional learning and improve practice 6.4 Apply professional learning and improve student learning 7.4 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities

**Table 3: Priority of feedback relating to different Focus Areas in the domain of Professional Engagement**

## Conclusion

The move to National Standards for teachers in Australia is consistent with reforms in education that have occurred across the developed world over the last 20 years. These reforms are well documented, with a large literature pointing to the negative impacts of they have had on teacher morale and sense of professionalism and their tendency to significantly increase teacher workload (Day & Smethem, 2009). While this reform cycle seems to be coming to end in some places, with some jurisdictions moving away from key elements such as census testing (Hargreaves, 2009), within the ACT change has gathered pace in recent years. In the last five years the ACT has implemented reforms including a new Territory-level curriculum framework replacing essentially school-based curriculum planning; the introduction of national testing in literacy and numeracy; the introduction of a national curriculum partly replacing the only recently adopted jurisdictional curriculum; the introduction of a teacher registration system; moves to limited performance pay and greater school autonomy in government schools; and a trialling of various forms of school structure.

A real danger of the use of prescribed professional standards in any profession is that they lead to a restricted understanding of professional practice. The current Australian National standards for teachers, for example, make no reference to the social context of teaching, expecting only that teachers will have teaching strategies responsive to the strengths and needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly the National Standards do not articulate a role for teachers in forming, critiquing and investigating the appropriateness of curriculum. Rather they are to use curriculum and assessment knowledge in a technical sense to design learning and teaching programs. The analysis presented in this paper reveals that this narrow technicist conception of teaching has entered the discourse of mentoring beginning teachers, even in open-ended approach of the *Professional Conversations* model. The discourse in the reports consistently positions teachers as the ‘deliverers’ of unproblematic ‘content,’ with good teaching being defined by the performance of planned lessons that include a variety of teaching strategies, with this variety addressing individual student difference. In this discourse, teacher professional knowledge and teacher professional practice are constructed as largely the same thing, and knowledge of cultural and linguistic difference is not relevant for neophyte teachers.

The understandings evident here are a significant challenge for achieving the ambitions of the *Professional Conversations Model* of professional experience which assumes that teacher inquiry rather than teacher performance is of premium importance. In discussing these results with practicing teachers it was pointed out that the mentors may be narrowing the scope of practice for neophyte teachers as a beginning teacher needs to be able to manage a classroom before they can teach anything with intellectual depth. The tension

here is that the research evidence shows such reasoning to be technically flawed. The *Productive Pedagogies* research, for example, showed that the major factors in quality learning environments included student self-regulation, an increased level of student control, and the existence of clear understandings of quality student performance (Hayes et al., 2006), leading the researchers to call for a correction of the ‘focus on student management relative to student learning, which mistakenly assumes that management should be addressed first and separately’ (Gore et al., 2004, p. 386). In addition, Hattie’s meta-analysis work shows that skills such as providing clear indications of successful performance have a significantly greater impact on student learning outcomes than classroom management strategies (Hattie, 2009). That is, a teacher who develops and communicates clear understandings of what counts as a good student performance will have a greater impact on student learning than one who can implement outstanding classroom management strategies. While it is likely that beginning teachers lack the background knowledge to take full advantage of the research cited here, models exist that can scaffold the types of understandings needed, such as the pedagogical literacies work of Cambourne & Kiggins (2004).

The pervasiveness of the discourse evident here also emphasises a divide between the university and school components of initial teacher education. University courses must address the full scope of the Professional Standards, and also tend to address issues that have traditionally been of great importance to the teaching profession such as social justice. The tacit message from mentor teachers here, however, is that such issues are simply not important in the real world of schools. The ambition of the *Professional Conversations* model is to realise the rhetoric that the National Standards should be a vehicle for teacher professional development rather than for teacher regulation. The evidence here, however, is that the use of the standards framework may be having the perverse effect of driving the mentoring of new teachers away from research-based practice. Realising the ambition of maintaining a developmental approach that is informed by the research knowledge will require the continuing collaborative work of the employers, the universities, the regulatory authorities, school leaders and, most importantly, the mentor teachers in schools, to develop a rich articulation of the professional knowledge and skills of teachers that reaches beyond the limitations of the proscribed standards.

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### Acknowledgements

- The *Professional Conversations Model* developed out of a pilot project conceived by Geoffrey Riordan (University of Canberra), Carolyn Broadbent (Australian Catholic University), Anne Ellis (ACT Teacher Quality Institute) and Michael Bateman (ACT Education and Training Directorate) and coordinated by Jocelyn Vasey (ACT Teacher Quality Institute). The pilot project was only possible through the support of the teaching staff at Macquarie Primary School, Holy Family Primary School at Gowrie, and St Clare of Assisi Primary School at Calwell.
- The model was further developed by numerous staff at both the University of Canberra and the Australian Catholic University including Misty Adoniou, Mary Gallagher, Misty Kirby, Simon Leonard and Philip Roberts.
- The input of Philip Roberts has been invaluable in the development of this paper.