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## **A Common Language? The Use of Teaching Standards in the Assessment of Professional Experience: Teacher Education Students' Perceptions**

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*Abstract: There is a strong critique of the reductionist, technical and instrumentalist impacts of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers from critical policy researchers in education. At the same time, advocates of the standards espouse their potential as providing a common language of teaching. We argue that both views are based on logical rather than empirical warrants. Therefore, this study sought to gather empirical data via a survey of 229 teacher education students followed by focus groups in an endeavour to record their perceptions on the use of the standards as assessment criteria for professional experience. The findings are that a majority of the students were advocates of the standards as a learning scaffold. This was especially true in contexts where their supervising teachers were not au fait with the standards. The implications of this study for teacher educators are that the formative assessment potential of the standards requires pedagogical consideration in professional experience alongside their more commonly understood role as summative assessment criteria.*

### **Introduction**

Critical policy researchers in education have been strong critics of the introduction of teacher performance standards and their views are well represented in the educational research literature. Their critique often centres on the reductionist, technical and instrumentalist impacts that performance standards have on the act of teaching. However, these researchers are not the subjects of these performance standards, unlike teacher education students (TES) who are the consequential stakeholders in the implementation of the standards in teacher education. It is therefore worthwhile to seek the views of TESs to develop an understanding of the actual impact of performance standards on their practice, specifically in relation to the assessment of their professional experience.

The use of teaching standards as a performance measure for teacher quality is now more than a decade old in the state of NSW in Australia. The process was introduced gradually from teacher education programs to new graduates who were labelled the 'new scheme teachers'. The first generation of these new scheme teachers are now into their twelfth year of teaching. In the interim, the NSW policy has been augmented by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in concert with a nationally audited accreditation process for teacher education.

The progressive introduction of the standards in NSW from initial teacher education programs out into the profession has meant that teacher education courses have been a testing ground for their implementation. In schools and faculties of education, the often small group of teacher educators were given the task of integrating the standards into course and program

outlines. At the same time, their colleagues in critical policy research in education were typically engaging in often robust debates about the overall purpose of the standards. Despite these debates, the standards had to be implemented as a condition of accreditation for providers of initial teacher education in Australia.

The biggest initial impact of the standards was on the high stakes performance assessment required in professional experience. This is where a large group of supervising teachers, untrained in the use of the standards, had to apply the new graduate teaching standards as criteria for assessing TESs on professional experience. Understandably, it was difficult for the providers of initial teacher education to achieve consistency in judgment across so many assessors and with unfamiliar assessment criteria.

This study examines the application of the standards to the assessment of professional experience in teacher education at a point more than ten years on from their first implementation in NSW. This examination occurs through a presentation and analysis of the views of TESs on the use of the standards as assessment criteria for their professional experience in a secondary teacher education program based in Sydney, NSW.

## Literature Review

This review of the literature examines both empirical and conceptual research into the implementation of the professional teaching standards in NSW and Australia. Most of the studies reviewed here are conceptual as there is little empirical work in this area, hence the rationale for this research. The paucity of the literature in this area has resulted in this review drawing upon non peer-reviewed sources such as government agencies. The net was cast wide for this review out of necessity, so the tone employed is suitably sceptical given the thin evidence base behind the warrants made in the majority of the studies that were reviewed. The review begins with an examination of the definitions used in relation to the concept of teacher standards before moving on to critically examine the benefits and limitations of the standards as presented in the literature.

There are some ambiguities in the definition of teacher standards in the literature. These ambiguities relate to the distinction between teaching and teacher standards, between their developmental or regulatory purpose and the conjecture on whether standards are competency-based or criterion-referenced.

It is interesting to note that NSW introduced professional standards for *teaching* in 2005 whilst at the federal level they were named the Australian Professional Standards for *Teachers*. This might be interpreted as a mere semantic shift from teaching to teachers but there is a view in critical policy research that this signals a significant shift in focus from the collective to the individual. In Mockler's (2013) view, "we have seen a shift in the past decade from a discourse focused on teaching quality to one focused on teacher quality" (p.37). The implication of this redefinition is that it will be easier for authorities to hold individual teachers to account for their performance, thus positioning the standards as a regulatory rather than a developmental device.

The binary between a developmental and regulatory definition of the standards is also evident in earlier conceptual work published last decade. Feiman-Nemser (2001) made an argument for mentoring over supervision for guiding new practitioners. Sachs (2005) made a strong case in support of developmental rather than regulatory standards, stating that the former enhanced a "commitment to teachers improving their professional knowledge and practice" (p.3) whilst the latter promoted a "focus on accountability, a technical approach to teaching, monitoring of teacher performance and compliance" (p.3). Finally, Cutter-McKenzie, Clarke and Smith (2008) were able to claim that in Australia there is "a

significant focus on a developmental approach” to the teaching standards (p.6) whilst in the UK and the US, “there is an increasing shift to a regulatory approach” (p.6). It would be interesting to examine what the authors of the last paper think of this distinction now that Australia has its nationwide professional standards for teachers.

The discussion of a developmental or regulatory approach is pertinent to the last ambiguity identified here in relation to the standards being competency-based or criterion-referenced. Both approaches can work with either models but the criterion referenced assessment gives the regulatory framework a little more capacity for discrimination between poor, average and good teachers. In contrast, a competency-based model might operate to enforce “an average quality of attainment” (Storey, 2006, p.217) that doesn’t permit such close monitoring of individual teacher quality. Storey (2006) claims that “‘competence’ and ‘standards’ in relation to teachers’ professional capacities are at times used interchangeably” (p. 218) suggesting that at least in the early implementation that the competency-based model may have been ascendant.

The possible regulatory function of the teacher standards is not made explicit in the literature that presents their benefits. This is not surprising as the majority of the texts that present arguments in favour of the standards emanate from the government agencies charged with the responsibility of implementing them. To be fair, there are also some peer-reviewed journal articles that canvass possible benefits of the standards. The texts reviewed here are all conceptual apart from where the odd quote is included from a stakeholder to add colour. We could not locate any systematic empirical research in this area on the Australian standards for teachers.

There are common themes that can be identified when authors discuss the benefits of the teacher standards in Australia. These are a common language for teachers, a definition of teacher professionalism in Australia and an explicit framework for teachers to assess their own progress.

The notion of the teacher standards being a common or shared language or discourse for teachers appeared in eight of the ten texts reviewed that related to their possible benefits. To “provide a common language” is a common phrase used in the texts. One of the ‘colour’ quotes alluded to earlier also related to this meme: “The Deputy Principal of Cranleigh School in the Australian Capital Territory described how the Standards reflect what I, and teachers I work with, do. They describe quality teaching in the same language which stops people having silos of practice that makes us feel different to others (AITSL, n.d. p.3). So there is a strong theme of the standardisation of teacher practice or, at the very least, a standard language of practice in the ‘common language’ meme that seems to be the prevalent benefit offered in the literature.

The second benefit of the teacher standards apparent in the literature is that the standards promote teaching as a profession in Australia in that professions define and regulate their own standards. The sponsors of the standards, that is the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership at the national level and the NSW Institute of Teachers (now amalgamated into the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) at the state level in NSW, promote this argument for obvious reasons. The phrases used by both agencies are identical: “The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality” (AITSL, 2011a; BOSTES, 2012). Raewyn Connell, in her classic paper on the good teacher in 2009, also alludes to this theme:

*[The standards] have been welcomed by some as a public definition of professionalism that displays the complex work that teachers do and the difficulty of doing it well. Given how fiercely teachers in public schools have been abused by the political Right over the last 30 years, this is helpful.*  
(p.220)

Connell's concession gives the nebulous concept of teacher quality a degree of complexity that the agencies' glib phrases lack. Connell (2009) elaborates this idea of a public professionalism for teaching with typical rhetorical flourish:

*The Standards may also help protect education against abuses of the 'charismatic' image of the good teacher, where politicians in search of publicity throw untrained youngsters into very difficult teaching situations on the Hollywood principle that natural talent will triumph in the last reel.*  
(p.220)

So we have, not surprisingly, the major agencies advocating for the benefit of public standards for the profession of teaching as well as a qualified admission from one of Australia's pre-eminent sociologists of education.

The final benefit of the standards discerned in the review of the literature was that the standards provide an explicit framework for teachers to guide their practice throughout their career span. The most common phrase used is "make explicit the elements of a high quality, effective teaching for the 21<sup>st</sup> century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students" (AITSL, 2011). There are some clichés in that phrase: "21<sup>st</sup> century schools" is the most obvious, but it is a statement hard to disagree with. There is also a peer-reviewed source that picks up this theme albeit in a paper that provides a robust critique of the use of teacher standards across the UK and Australia. Clarke and Moore (2013) canvas a number of "potential advantages" of teacher standards if one is prepared to accept "the fantasy in which teaching and learning can be homogenized via a 'common understanding' and 'clarified' within a 'framework'" (p.488-489). Within this caveat, they suggest that one of the potential advantages is "providing increased transparency for pre-service teacher candidates, making the criteria against which they will be evaluated explicit" (p.489). The conceit of Clarke and Moore's fantasy culminates in the statement that the standards "can be seen to make teaching and its evaluation more transparent, predictable, and efficient" (p.489). This is hardly an endorsement of the standards by Clarke and Moore but even the presence of this argument within the irony of their conceit suggests that explicit criteria for practice might be entertained as a possible benefit of the teacher standards.

In summary, there are scant empirical warrants to support the claims of any of the benefits of the standards offered or, more accurately, promoted in the literature. The same can be said of the limitations of the standards that are presented in the literature. There are mainly conceptual arguments that are appropriate in critical policy research where document analysis constitutes the primary methodology in many studies. The more rigorous papers refer more often to the primary documents to build their case whilst the less rigorous rely on what sometimes appears to the reader to be little more than politically motivated conjecture.

The limitations of the standards presented in the literature may be divided into a critique of the standards themselves and the critique of their application in Australia. The critique of the standards centres on their attempts at homogenisation of an idiosyncratic craft, their omission of the affective domain, their links to performativity and their potential infringement on teacher autonomy. The critique of their application focuses on their haphazard, weak application in schools as well as a concern over teacher ownership in their development.

The standards have been criticised because some researchers believe that their intent is to homogenise an idiosyncratic craft. Mayer, Luke & Luke (2008) described it as the emergence of:

*the generic teacher branded as a corporate entity and defined in terms of generic competences, skills, interchangeable parts in a global education system with uniform practices including testing, mandated textbooks, scripted*

*teaching, school based management, marketisation and economic management issues. (p. 81)*

Clarke and Moore (2013) include homogenisation as an important aspect of their standards fantasy conceit: “It is a fantasy that teaching and learning can be homogenized” (p.2). Clarke and Moore use the example of standard two in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, “Know the content and how to teach it,” as an example of a vague statement of the obvious that has no hope of capturing “the idiosyncratic and contingent in teaching and learning” (AITSL, 2011, p.11). Unfortunately, Clarke and Moore omit to mention that underneath the broad statements are focus descriptors for each of the four levels. For example, focus descriptor 2.4.2 reads “Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (AITSL, 2011, p.11). It is conceivable that an early career teacher could benefit from the guidance of this more particular statement.

A corollary of the homogenisation critique is the conception that teacher standards impinge on the autonomy of the teacher and that autonomy is regarded as fundamental to a profession. This is rather ironic given that one of the main benefits promoted in the literature is that the standards will signify teacher professionalism for the public. Obviously there are two different working definitions operating here. The critics argue that it is the regulatory function and measurement-orientation of the standards that create ‘performance standards’ that “emphasise technical and instrumentalist approaches to teaching” (Mockler, 2013, p.38). The point of distinction between the two working definitions seems to be then not the standards themselves but how they are used by government agencies. Presumably, other professions may use their own standards as performance measures but they apply the measures in-house like the law society.

A culture of performativity is regarded as a major limitation of the standards in the literature. This is closely aligned with the previous argument as it is reasoned that this will lead to the demise of the profession as teachers in a culture of performativity have to “choose and judge our actions and they are judged by others on the basis of their contribution to organizational performance, rendered in terms of measurable outputs” (Ball, 2003, p. 223). This is the “false consciousness” critique that centres on teachers losing their identity as they adopt the culture of standards and self-improvement is prominent. Taubman’s title of his 2009 text created a meme, “teaching by numbers,” and the author himself did not hold back: “performance standards transform individuals into self-monitoring and monitored selves, who are urged or feel compelled to embrace constant self-improvement in their practice, which is aligned with standards that strip the individual of any autobiographical idiosyncrasy” (p.117). It seems then the standards are regarded by these critics as an autocratic imposition that will potentially diminish the individuality and idiosyncrasy of teaching.

The final critique of the standards themselves is their perceived silencing of the affective domain of teaching. The argument is that a regulatory approach requires standards that are amenable to measurement. This occludes the aspects of teaching that are less obvious, “in particular the affective dimensions that mobilise and animate teaching and learning” (Gannon, 2012, p.59). In the views of another critic, “it is apparent that the current professional teaching standards overlook the role that caring and personal values play in teacher’s work” (O’Connor, 2008, p.119). This seems to be a valid critique given that the current standards do not directly address this part of teachers’ work. Whether they are beyond the remit of a set of standards is a question worth further investigation. This question is beyond the scope of this study as we are limited to examining the application of the current standards, to which we move in the next and last section of this review.

If one accepts the inevitability of the standards, and it may well be time for this concession after ten years of their use in NSW, then critique might be more purposely

directed at their application to teaching practice. There is some critique of their application and, refreshingly, it is based on some data, albeit not published in a peer-reviewed publication. The critique centres on the perception that there was no rigorous accountability framework for their implementation and the inability of supervising teachers to use them as assessment criteria for TESs on professional experience. The two main sources of this critique are a report from an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) sponsored study (Ure, 2009) and a 2014 report from the Australian Commonwealth Government's Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) with the title of "Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers".

The TEMAG critique of the weak application of the standards due to a lack of rigorous implementation is the easier of the two arguments to address. Their critique is summarised in the following quote from the report: "AITSL led the development of the Professional Standards and Accreditation Standards. While it now has an ongoing role in the maintenance of these standards, AITSL has no role in regulation to ensure they are rigorously implemented" (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014, p.3). This speaks to the contested federalism that, depending on your viewpoint, is either a blessing or a burden to the operation of the Australian Commonwealth Government. In this case AITSL, the Commonwealth sponsored agency, developed the standards but relinquished their implementation to the eight state and territory agencies responsible for teacher registration. This constitutes both a pragmatic political and logistical compromise on the part of AITSL but it also means that there may not be the same rigorous implementation process across the Commonwealth. In matters educational, the premier state of NSW likes to assert its pre-eminence which is the heart of many contested federal debates in this field. However, in the area of Teaching Standards, NSW has claims to be a leader having implemented their own compulsory standards and processes from 2005 onwards.

The second critique of the application of the standards focuses on a pedagogical rather than a political issue. This is the inability of supervising teachers to apply the teaching standards to the assessment of TESs on professional experience. This finding emerged from the Practicum Partnerships Project that "examined the professional learning experiences of preservice teachers in graduate secondary teacher education programs offered by eight higher education providers in Victoria". The teaching standards examined here are the Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT) Standards for Graduating Teachers developed in 2007, two years after the NSW version, and prior to the launch of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in 2011.

The Ure report contains data from interviews with TESs that led the author to claim in the recommendation section that "preservice teachers are more strongly influenced by the views of supervising teachers than they are by the goals of providers [universities] or ... Standards" (Ure, 2009, p.5). Within the report, the interview data is a little more nuanced: "preservice teachers believe that, while many outstanding or very good opportunities were provided to increase or shape their professional learning ... [some of the Standards] were either poorly supported or not covered during their placements" (p.38). The report may be a little too harsh on the supervising teachers who were working with standards that were not even a year old at the time of the data generation. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the initial Victorian Standards focused solely on graduating teachers rather than across four stages in the career span like the earlier NSW and the later AITSL iterations. The supervising teachers alluded to in the study may have then been entitled to think that the standards were about TESs and not about them.

The focus of the Ure report on professional experience is apposite to the purposes of this study. Professional experience in teacher education is the realpolitik of the implementation of the professional teacher standards (Bloomfield, 2009) that is more real

than the rhetoric of the sponsoring agencies or the trenchant critiques from policy researchers. It is in professional experience where each person's interpretation of the teacher standards is plainly evident. Di Bloomfield (2009) expressed this most eloquently, "Divergent views as to what constitutes the 'good' student teacher and the 'good' teacher, as well as the 'good' teacher educator, underpin many of the tensions associated with the field of Professional Experience" (p.27). The literature reviewed in this section suggests that the teacher standards in Australia do not, in their current form, define what is a 'good' teacher for many stakeholders in education.

This study focuses on the perceptions of TESs with regards to the standards as assessment criteria for their professional experience. This is an important study because the views of TESs as the consequential stakeholders of the standards now and into the future need to be taken into account. Furthermore, this study examines empirical data rather than engaging in ideological rhetoric or clichéd promotional bytes. Hence the research question for this study is: What are the perceptions of TESs with regards to the use of the professional teacher standards as assessment criteria for their professional experience?

## Methodology

This research paper was informed by data drawn from a larger study that explored TESs' perceptions of the quality of feedback provided by mentors during professional experience. To learn what is meaningful or relevant to the participants, the study adopted a naturalistic, qualitative, interpretivist approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Neuman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and self-report questionnaires employing open-ended questions were selected as the research methods to provide an in-depth examination of the participants and topics (Davies, 2007).

The site of the study was an Australian, public, research-intensive university. The target population consisted of all the postgraduate students (Graduate Diploma and Master of Education) enrolled in the first year and all the undergraduate students enrolled in the third year of their education degree who were undertaking professional experience in a secondary school during the first semester of 2014. There were approximately 350 TESs in total in this group. An application to undertake the research study was submitted to, and approved by, the university's Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel. Written permission was obtained from all participants taking part in the investigation, except for the anonymous questionnaire, where consent was implied when participants responded.

In the first phase of the study, the TESs were invited to take part in a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews. 10-12 participants were targeted to be recruited but eventually only nine participated fully in this phase of the study. Participants were also required, during their four week attachment to a school, to provide responses to a number of open questions posed each week via email and participate in a focus group once professional experience concluded. An open and fluid approach was adopted for data collection. The initial interview was guided by a series of key questions which asked participants about the nature of the feedback message they were provided during professional experience and the interactional context in which it was delivered. Probing questions were then used to explore in depth any new themes or areas of interest that emerged during the dialogue. These topics were then further discussed during the focus group. All conversations were digitally recorded with the permission of participants, verbatim transcripts made, and copies of the transcripts sent to participants for member checking.

The second phase of the study was conducted shortly after professional experience finished. All the TESs in the cohort were invited to complete an anonymous, self-report



questionnaire with a series of open-ended questions developed from the literature and some of the themes that had emerged in phase one of the study. Of the 350 students, 109 undergraduate students and 120 postgraduate students submitted useable returns.

All the data collected via the interviews, focus group, and questionnaires were entered into an electronic data-base. Content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) provided a method for analyzing meaning in the data. Different descriptors were used to code segments of text that appeared to capture key thoughts or concepts. Categories, derived from the literature or based on emergent themes from the data itself, were then used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters. The findings, discussed below, are reported in the language of the informant as advocated by Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008) with *in vivo* terms and verbatim extracts from participants being used to illustrate the different themes.

## Findings

The findings of the study are presented in three sections. The first section examines TESs' perceptions of the standards themselves, the second section looks at their perceptions of how their Supervising Teachers' use them and the final section reports on data that suggests the TES are the experts and their ST novices in the application of the standards to practice.

### TES' Perceptions of the Standards

The TES students in this study in the main had a positive view of the standards. They liked the scaffolding the standards afforded them during their professional experience. There was some data that suggest some of the standards were less accessible to these students. A theme that emerged strongly from the analysis of these data is that the majority of TESs have embraced and are advocates of the Standards. TESs consequently might be described as converts and disciples of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. Many agreed that the Standards are "a really useful tool" and provide "a common language":

*It also does give me a language to discuss those things with colleagues. It gives me a language that I can easily call on if I want to discuss any of those things, maybe I just think are intuitive or obvious, but I can still speak those things with colleagues with a language we share.*

It is interesting to note here that the meme of the standards as being "a common language" has been adopted by a TES.

Several TESs also explicitly stated that the pro-forma used by the university on professional experience, such as the Lesson Observation Feedback Form, Intermediate Report and Final Report (or assessment form) which are linked to the Standards and required to be completed by the ST during the professional experience process, were beneficial to their professional development. One explained that although the "conversational feedback" he received was "not so directly related to the Standards" the pro-forma which explicitly makes connections with the Standards "certainly helps". It would also appear that TESs commonly use the Standards to independently evaluate their own performance and practice, in some cases, the TESs reporting that the Standards acted to "affirm" what they were doing in the classroom and school:

*I did relate [the feedback given] back to the Standards mainly because my teacher did use the form, and the form is related to the Standards, and I really like that. I really found it very useful. I find the Standards useful ... [because] I am able to use them as a structure for reflection ... no matter how much I think I am doing it, or intuitively I am doing it anyway, I still find it reassuring to be able to check myself against it.*

Due to limited teaching experience, one TES qualified that some of the Standards remain abstract or academic knowledge to them rather than experiential knowledge that has been realized through situated learning “Some of it at this point seems quite abstract. With little real-world experience, some of the standards seem quite far away from being achievable just yet”.

### **TES’ Perceptions of Supervising Teachers’ Use of the Standards**

The data on TES’ perceptions of their supervising teachers’ use of the standards had three themes. These themes are the ST’s attitudes towards the standards, their tacit understanding of the standards and their confusion around their application.

The perception of many of the TESs was that their mentors and other teachers in the school where they undertook their professional experience had variable attitudes towards the Standards. Members of the focus group which took part in this study specifically identified three “groups” existing among teachers, namely the “resistors and cynics”, “middle ground”, and “converts and advocates” of the Standards. As described by one TES:

*I feel like there are a few levels of the use of the Standards. There is the sort of lip service, “I have been teaching for a really long time, I am not really interested in looking at them”, level. There is the level of teachers who are slightly versed with them but not completely and so they touch on them maybe and will have a brief conversation perhaps with you about them and be able to refer to the Standards in general but maybe not specifically. And then there are teachers - in my experience, these are the sort of three groups of conversations I have – and then there are teachers and students also, colleagues of ours, who maybe are in any of these groups. It do not think it is necessarily age-related although generally the older, more long-teaching people are probably less, at this point, anyway, until they have to be accredited, generally less familiar with them in specifics. The third one is that group that really embrace them and really use them as a tool, because it is a really useful tool.*

Although the Standards perhaps have not been internalized as a common language or are consciously understood by all teachers, none-the-less many TESs were of the firm opinion that the majority of teachers are highly proficient and innately capable of meeting all the Standard Descriptors:

*If I watch their lessons, they were excellent teachers, but the thing is they did not want to qualitatively or quantitatively go into the Standards, read them, and go, “Oh yeah. I’ve met that. Tick a box” ... They were meeting the Standards but they didn’t realise that it was easy for them to translate them into the Standards and go tick, tick, tick, tick.*

In several instances, the TES believed that their ST was “confused” by the Standards and the pro-forma used as part of the professional experience process:

*My supervising teacher, for the first two or three of my lessons, she would try to find the right slot to put things in, but she commented [that] some of her comments didn't really fit this slot or that slot. By about the fourth [lesson] she realised that she could put any of her comments in the end, so she abandoned the Standards on the form. She just wrote, yes, yes, yes, and then wrote her comments in, and she limited it to one or two things, and put them in that bottom section of that form.*

This last theme contrasts with the next section of the findings where we report on the data that expresses TES' gratitude at the feedback they received from the STs who used the standards well.

### ***Useful Feedback from STs***

The majority of TESs believed that the feedback they received during professional experience greatly assisted them in the progress they made towards achievement of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). They believed that the standards provided a useful framework for the STs to construct their feedback and to set goals for their progress.

There was evidence from these data that the TES thought the standards helped to structure the feedback provided by their supervising teachers. For one TES this type of feedback was a common occurrence, "After every lesson I taught I was given specific feedback regarding the Standards. I knew exactly how to improve and how I could work towards achieving the Standards". Another TES identified the lesson observation guide as a key instrument in this process, "[The] Feedback sheet in the handbook very specifically measures our activity in class with the Standards. This assisted greatly in progress towards the Standards". The interim report that occurs midway in the professional experience was another instrument that employs the standards that a TES found useful, "The interim report was beneficial because it showed me specifically things I needed to work on".

Other TES responses in these data alluded to the role that the standards played in the goals that their supervising teachers set for them. For one TES, the standards provided a practical scaffold in that, "The agreement between myself and the supervising teacher was to only work on improving one or two areas at once." Another TES had a supervising teacher who "provided me examples that could be used in the next lesson to meet specific Standards." The next section of the paper reports on the TES perception of less than helpful feedback from supervising teachers.

### ***Less Than Helpful Feedback from STs Using the Standards***

There was also a significant number of TESs who believed that the feedback given by mentors provided them with little or no help at all in their work towards demonstrating the Standards. TESs attributed this to; the feedback provided not being linked to the Standards, the mentor not having a sound knowledge of the Standards, or the TES not understanding what the Standards mean.

Some of the feedback from the supervising teachers did not relate to the standards, "Not a lot as we never went through specific Standards except for the ones I brought up." For one TES, this was due to their ST not having a sound knowledge of the standards, "Truthfully - my teacher did not have much knowledge of the Standards. The feedback was not directly linked to improvement in the Standards." Finally, another TES acknowledged that it was their own lack of understanding of the

standards that was the issue, “If the Standards were explained more clearly to me – maybe.” The final section of the findings reported in this paper focuses on when the TES did have a good understanding of the standards and became the expert in the professional experience relationship because of this.

### **The TES as Novice and as Expert**

Often the TES had a superior understanding of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in comparison to their ST. In these relationships, the TES became the expert and the ST the novice and the TES needed to educate, manage and direct the ST in understanding and applying the standards.

The TES often had to guide their ST in understanding and applying the standards. This is exemplified by the following quote:

*I asked my ST to give me a report midway through so that I can work on his feedback in the last two weeks. From this a number of the standards were unknown to him and we had to look up the meanings at the back of the prac’ book.*

Where a ST did not relate feedback to the Standards, individual TES would implement a strategy to compensate for this:

*I’ve basically started to highlight individual standards and attaching them to the lesson plan so that my ST specifically focuses on those standards in that lesson which made him provide a little more useful feedback.*

This proactive approach is a great prelude to the adoption of a full professional learning cycle and this self-development is also evident in the response of another TES who acknowledged that “it has been my own personal reflections that led to my progress.”

The TES, sometimes because of their prior learning, their age and/or their collective life experiences, was able to demonstrate superior achievement of certain Standard Descriptors. Such circumstances provided the opportunity for reciprocal learning between the TES and the ST:

*As a general rule my ST tends not to complete many practicals in his senior class. I believe my previous teaching experiences have equipped me to complete this to a higher level than my ST. In saying this, my ST is keen to collaborate with me to put more pracs’ into his classes and is open to many of my ideas.*

*My ST has said repeatedly that I teach like someone who has been doing it for years.*

*I also feel that I am good at handling the general behaviour of the class – from years of raising and yelling at my own kids!*

However, even in such instances, the TES acknowledged that their superior knowledge was limited to a few Standard Descriptors, and that the ST had a superior experiential knowledge across all the other Descriptors:

*Whilst I am definitely the expert in my field of science, having worked in the field for 15 years and taught at a university level, I view my ST as the expert in teaching adolescents.*

*My supervising teacher understands that I have taught before and has targeted my development into a high school by explaining the dynamics of the class and helping me be more general and explaining things more than once so students who have little prior knowledge can understand the concepts being taught.*

In summary, the application of the standards to the assessment of these TES' professional experience was characterised by its variability. The next section of the paper moves onto the discussion of these findings using the literature reviewed earlier in the paper.

## Discussion

The findings presented in this paper have confirmed some of the conceptual arguments in favour of the standards that were reviewed earlier. These are the worth of the standards as a common language, their role as an explicit framework for teaching and their value in promoting self-assessment, reflection on practice and professional conversations. The findings also lend weight to the argument that the application of the standards to the practice of professional experience is variable in quality.

The meme of the standards as a common language for the profession was evident in this study. One of the TESs actually used the meme in their interview responses. The presence of a common language to talk about practice seems to be particularly beneficial for TESs starting out in the profession, a finding that is supported in the literature (Baron, 2006; Danielson, 2015). Therefore, the sceptical attitude we employed towards this meme in the review needs to be tempered by the realisation of the utility of this meme's expression.

The role of the standards in providing an explicit framework for teaching was also evident in this study. We were also sceptical about this argument in our review, mainly because of the clichéd embellishment that came with it such as '21<sup>st</sup> century teaching' and 'high quality, effective teaching' (AITSL, 2011). Once again, we were disciplined by empiricism as many of our participants spoke of the standards as affirming their practice especially when their supervising teacher used the standards well to give feedback. These data seem to support the claim by their sponsors that the standards are indeed an explicit framework for teaching. That is all we can argue because judgments on what constitutes quality teaching, improved student outcomes or 21<sup>st</sup> century education require evidence not available from this case study.

The findings also support the argument that the standards are a developmental tool that assists in promoting self-assessment, reflection on practice and professional conversations. It is interesting to consider this finding with regards to the broader dichotomy in the literature between the regulatory and developmental functions associated with the application of the standards. One might expect that TESs undertaking the high stakes assessment of a professional experience would clearly be able to identify the regulatory aspect but not the developmental. Our findings did surprise us in that there was a clear developmental theme in their responses alongside the expected regulatory ones around lesson evaluations, interim and final reports. The developmental aspect was given a boost by the fact that some of the supervising teachers were not very skilled at giving feedback based on the standards so the TESs instigated their own reflection based on the standards. In effect, the standards supported the development of the TES in the absence of focused mentoring. This is an encouraging finding for teacher educators in this interim period where not all supervising teachers are conversant with the standards.

The findings from this study lend weight to the argument that the application of the standards to practice is variable in terms of its quality. This confirms a similar finding by Ure back in 2009 which we suggested may have been partly due to the novelty of the standards to the supervising teachers at the time of that study. We could not offer the same qualification for the 2014 argument progressed by TEMAG in their "Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers" report. Our findings generated from our 2014 data collection affirm their point that the effective application of the standards has not penetrated into all schools and teachers in

the Commonwealth of Australia. We would not go as far as TEMAG to describe it as being weak in deference to our many fine colleagues in schools who have taken the extra responsibility of learning to apply the national standards since 2011. Our findings do demonstrate that these teachers are not in the majority at present.

## Conclusions

This study analysed the perceptions of TESs towards the use of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers as assessment criteria for the high-stakes performance assessment of professional experience. We expected that the assessment and reporting aspect of this process would be a strong aspect of their responses which it was. However, we were surprised by the finding that many of the TESs were advocates of the developmental function of the standards in guiding and supporting their professional learning on professional experience. This is in spite of the fact that they also acknowledged that some of their supervising teachers were not particularly *au fait* with the standards.

Our case study has provided some much needed data that provided the hitherto under-represented views of arguably the most consequential stakeholders in TESs. We cannot generalise from our case study but the analysis of our data suggests that it is a worthwhile research and pedagogical endeavour to pursue such enquiries. The insights gained from this study have assisted us as teacher educators to re-examine the pedagogical potential of the teacher standards as an explicit framework of teaching for use in self-assessment and critical reflection for TESs on professional experience. Supervising teachers need to be included in this discussion as well given the findings of this study demonstrate that not every supervising teacher on professional experience will have the necessary skills and understanding of the standards to provide constructive feedback to our students.

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