Supporting Pre-Service Teachers in Becoming Reflective Practitioners Using Conversation and Professional Standards

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Abstract: A significant goal of teacher education is to support the development of reflective practitioners. This intention, however, is not easily achieved when after-the-fact recall and reporting are key features of pre-service teacher learning rather than critique and contemplation. This research reports on a small-scale pilot study evaluating a novel approach to help pre-service teachers develop reflective skills in order to both understand and address the requirements of the profession. The approach involved a set of Conversation Cards with a series of question-based prompts directly linked to the APSTs and designed to enhance reflective conversations. Focus group interview discussions unveiled the surprising ways in which the pre-service teachers used the question prompts, not only as tools for reflection but for planning lessons and preparing for professional discussions with mentors. This research provides insight into a creative and meaningful approach for integrating reflection, professional standards and classroom practice through professional experience.

Keywords: reflective practice, teacher education, pre-service teachers, professional experience, professional standards, mentoring, classroom practice, question prompts

Introduction

There is wide agreement that professional experience should be a reflective learning process (Craven et al., 2014; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Impedovo & Malik, 2016; Loughran, 2010). Currently, within the Australian context, professional experience is assessed against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs). There is a view that this assessment of teacher competence prioritises a quantifiable and summative approach, borne out of a neoliberal agenda (Connell, 2009). The risk of having the evaluation of standards as a summative process is that it becomes a box-ticking or 'fitness for teaching' exercise, rather than a collaborative learning experience for professional development over time (Beck, Livne & Bear, 2005; Southgate, Reynolds & Howley, 2013).

This study aimed to address the potential devaluing of reflection in professional experience through exploring a novel approach that facilitates greater understandings of the professional standards in practice. The approach involves a series of printed question prompts, or provocations, in the form of *Conversation Cards* (see Figure 1).

These cards were intended to facilitate pre-service teacher (PST) reflection and PST-mentor teacher interactions within and around professional experience. As a series of question prompts, the cards were devised to provoke reflective thinking with the intent to improve practice as a consequence of reflective conversations with self and mentor in relation to meeting teacher standards. In doing so, the study also aimed to partly address an ongoing concern for initial teacher education (ITE) and its role in the provision of professional experience to prepare PSTs for the profession.
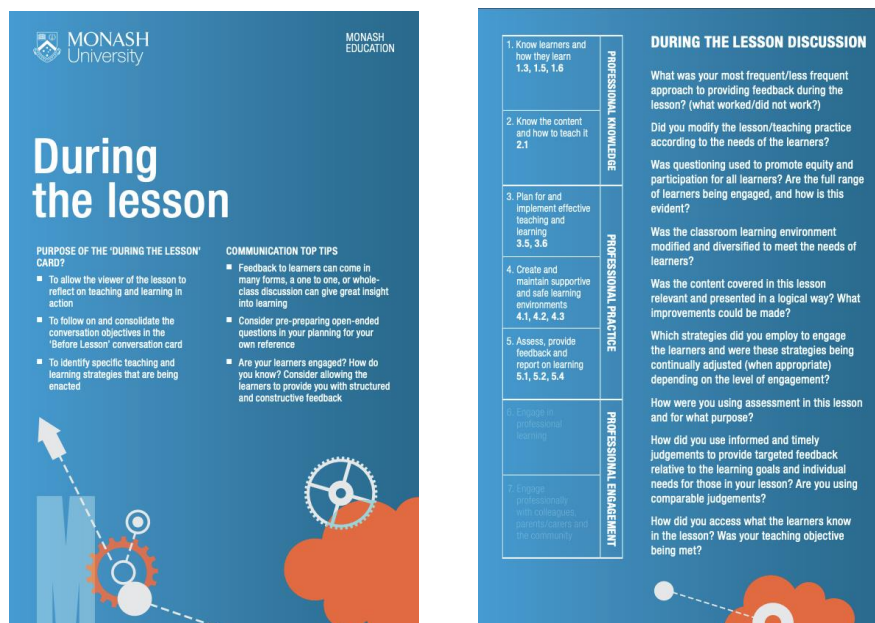

Figure 1: Example of the front and back detail of the During the lesson *Conversation Cards*

Background

In the Australian context, preparedness to teach is governed by the national regulator the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and assessed using the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs). This requirement has been identified as a means of garnering specific levels of proficiency in practice-based contexts in an informed and consistent manner. While ideally this process is ongoing and reflective (Craven et al., 2014; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Impedovo & Malik, 2016; Loughran, 2010), realistically it tends to be summative in nature (Larsen, 2005). This suggests that the assessment of professional experience can often be viewed as a bureaucratic exercise (Connell, 2009), the mindset being that rather than focusing on the learning journey, the emphasis is on producing professional experience reports in which "all boxes [in this report] must be ticked" (Southgate et al., 2013, p. 13). The evaluation of APSTs becomes intentionally or unintentionally a summative process that occurs at the end of professional experience to ascertain 'fitness for teaching' rather than a shared collaborative experience of capacity building overtime. Southgate and colleagues (2013) cited this mentality as being one of the wicked problems plaguing ITE. What remains uncertain in this summative approach is the reality of how many of these standards can be used by mentor teachers to actually quantifiably assess competency without the need for further articulation and reflection from the PST (Southgate et al., 2013). It is 'problems' such as this within ITE that highlight the technical and operational issues inherent in preparing future teachers as well as the theoretical and political undercurrents influencing practices (Connell, 2009; Southgate et al., 2013).

While this standards-focused approach to assessing PSTs' competencies is not without merit, care is needed to ensure that knowledge in practice is not valued or preferred over tacit knowledges (Eraut, 1995, p. 12). One approach is to foreground and embed opportunities for reflective practice during professional experience where reflection is defined as an active and deliberate cognitive process intended to improve learning and teaching outcomes (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Mena-Marcos, Garcia-Rodriguez & Tillema, 2013). This approach has been endorsed in a number of policy and curriculum documents including the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report (Craven et al., 2014). This suggestion is an interesting one as it unearths the predominant focus in the literature highly valuing the reflective practices of in-service teachers (e.g. Impedovo & Malik, 2016; Loughran, 2010), while revealing a possible gap in which PSTs are not supported in nurturing their reflective skill (e.g. McLaren & Arnold, 2016). Adequate assessment of reflective skills and qualities is not actually achievable if the APSTs are being used in superficial or summative ways during professional experience.

Addressing the 'problem' articulated by Southgate et al. (2013) was a primary factor leading to the development of a set *Conversation Cards* for PSTs and their mentors to use during professional experience. The intention of this resource was to provide a meaningful way for PSTs and their mentor teachers to engage with the APSTs (AITSL, 2014). They sought to re-frame the use of APSTs from reporting on PSTs' practice as a superficial assessment routine, towards a more supportive communication and reflective process. Specifically, the research question being responded to through this paper is: What were the opportunities and challenges a small cohort of first year PSTs faced during their professional experience when they were supported in becoming reflective practitioners through a series of APST-informed prompt questions?

At this early point in the paper, it is important to note that this particular 'problem' of practice is not new. In the following review of literature, we have tracked concerns around the summative assessment of PSTs through their professional experience and the value (or otherwise) of this approach over two decades. These concerns have not diminished, but rather have been further fueled by the commissioned TEMAG report and the rolling out over the past five years of a number of the recommendations. In terms of this study, the increasingly high-stakes focus on the APSTs to measure pre-service teacher competency prior to graduation from an ITE program through their final professional experience report and the teaching performance assessment (TPA; a mandatory 'capstone' project from 2019) is problematic. Therefore, studies such as this one, which seek to work within the national requirements for ITE providers but counter the continued draw towards a 'tick box' response, are still very much relevant and required. This work is perhaps even more necessary given the scale and pace of change in ITE in recent years.

Conceptual Underpinnings

The notion of becoming a teacher is well-researched (Alexakos, 2015), though it is often viewed through the lens of the in-service teacher; someone who is already positioned in the classroom as a professional (Sim, 2006). The intention of this study is to better understand this journey of 'becoming' from the perspective of the PST; someone who is starting to experience the classroom as an educator and in the early stages of forming their teacher identity. For this paper, the focus is particularly drawn to three key areas emerging from the literature – professional experience, teacher standards and reflective practice – with each explored in more detail below.

Professional Experience and Moving Towards Proficiency

Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers (Craven et al., 2014) is a recent, influential Australian-based report (commonly referred to in familiar terms as the *TEMAG report*) that encapsulated the viewpoints of a variety of stakeholders from teachers to academics. The TEMAG report has proven to be a powerful catalyst for a renewed focus on rigour and innovation in ITE (Craven et al., 2014; Southgate et al, 2013). It is also responsible for the emergence of a narrative in both teacher education policy and practice calling for improvement in the classroom readiness of graduate teachers. A significant contributor to this notion of classroom readiness is the role of professional experience in ITE. The TEMAG report raised numerous topics for further consideration, and ultimately action, regarding school-based experiences. These included but were not limited to (i) a greater focus on linking theory to practice, (ii) ensuring a high level of expectations and (iii) for pre-service and practicing teachers to continually 'reflect on and adjust' (Craven et al., 2014, p. 154) their own practice. As a way of highlighting the value and importance of reimagining the purpose and role of professional experience in Australia, the document drew links to countries that are considered leaders in teacher development (e.g. Finland) where the focus is on providing their PSTs with support to continually reflect, analyse and adjust their teaching (Craven et al., 2014, p. 155).

Within the TEMAG report, initiatives for PSTs were discussed specifically and drew out areas for more careful consideration, such as the role of reflection on the development of teaching practices. For the purpose of this article and based on the emergent themes from the data, the attention is focused on the reflective practices of PSTs, both individually and with their mentor teacher as a means to further develop proficiencies in the APSTs.

Standards for Teachers and Becoming a Teacher

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) is a national framework that was developed and informed through extensive research and consultation with teaching authorities, employers and associations (AITSL, 2014). Across all states and territories AITSL, the instigator of this initiative, describe the APSTs as a "public statement of what constitutes teacher quality" (AITSL, 2017, p.1) and assert that the aim behind their implementation is improving educational outcomes for students (AITSL, 2017). While quality might be the driver of the APSTs, Ryan and Bourke (2018) discuss both the ambiguity and contextualisation that exist around the notion of teacher quality. A particular concern emerging from their research is the notion that the APSTs will be used to dictate terms and arrive at predetermined outcomes about what constitutes professional practice; an approach which could be interpreted as "reductionist or superficial" (Ryan & Bourke, 2018, p. 169). It is widely acknowledged that any discussion of 'measuring' quality teaching can be perceived as a foreboding and loaded topic (Overton, 2006).

Within their research, Ryan and Bourke (2018) tackle these concerns by identifying and discussing the possible impact that implementation of a set of standards, such as the APSTs, can have on learning and teaching outcomes. They found that rather than using the standards as a tool for professional learning, what often results is the practice of ascertaining when teachers are performing at an unsatisfactory level and in some cases, standards get deployed as disciplinary measures. Ryan and Bourke (2018) suggest that using the standards in a generative way may be of benefit instead of constantly reverting to "acceptance, critique and/or capitulation" (p. 172). This study was interested in exploring the notion that there is value in changing the ways in which the standards are used, to move away from a quality

framing checklist to that of a list of "provocations for practice" (Ryan & Bourke, 2018, p. 182), which could be expressed as dialogic reflection between teacher professionals.

Whether or not the standards were intended to be used formatively as a tool for ongoing development, or as a summative document of accountability is a contestable subject for educational researchers. According to Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (2000), various ideological viewpoints exist including the multidimensional role standards can play in producing a set of guidelines, a set of desired outcomes of "preferred procedures and performance" (p. 97), or creating a framework for inquiry into a teacher's practice. Connell (2009), in her discussion on what constitutes a 'good teacher', laments that the standards emerge from a political standpoint embedded in a "neoliberal distrust of teachers' judgement" (p.220) that potentially leads to an "arbitrary narrowing of practice" (p.220). Such ideologies have implications for how teachers and PSTs use standards in their everyday practice. Hudson (2009) explores the ideology of the standards from an ITE perspective, where PSTs and their supervising teachers are seen to be grappling with their ability to show proficiency against the standards. He advises that pre-service and supervising teachers need to be supported before, during and after the process. Hudson (2009) argues for the development of reliable artefacts that can support the determination of meeting teaching standards. The *Conversation Cards* were created to provide a way to support the development of authentic and formative evidence against the standards through a more structured reflective and conversational process.

Role of Reflection in Learning to Teach

Reflection is arguably one of the most important aspects of learning and teaching practice due to its ability to potentially be transformative, support the meaning making process and allow for the development of knowledge (Eraut, 1995; Loughran, 2002; Toom, Husu & Patrikainen 2015). Toom and colleagues (2015) stress that reflection can be a particularly powerful tool to assist teachers when facing the challenge of reviewing their own teaching practices. The transformative nature of reflection is foregrounded particularly through the process of challenging one's own assumptions and allocating space to work through the possible implications and consequences of decisions made in relation to teaching practice (a process often referred to as pedagogical reasoning) (Pella, 2015). Meaning making can be achieved through teacher reflection, however, time, effort and commitment to a regular reflective practice is required if there is to be significant impact (Eraut, 1995; Toom et al., 2015). Loughran (2002) discusses the idea that reflection is part of engaging in professional practice and allows for development of knowledge about learning and teaching through what he terms the "reconsideration of practice" (Loughran, 2002, p. 34). This phrase emphasises the learning that has taken place in practice through the use of questioning and investigation as a means for developing further understanding. This viewpoint is particularly pertinent for those who view the role of professional learning as an "emancipation of practice by learning through practice" (Loughran, 2002, p. 34), as it positions the ability to reflect on practice in meaningful ways as a valuable asset.

Although there are numerous reasons to value the role of reflective practice during teaching, Loughran (2002) articulates the importance of attaching significance and purpose to the process rather than engaging in reflection for reflection's sake. In the context of this paper, PSTs require their mentors to do more than just state a problem in the context of the placement experience. They require scaffolding, discussion and guidance to assist in determining what the problem is and how it might be resolved. Reframing the problem (Schön, 1987) by using reflective practice can assist PSTs to consider and be exposed to

seeing the problem and possible solutions in different ways.

One approach to reframing the problem being addressed by this study is to encourage PSTs and their mentors to ask and answer a series of prompt questions (see Figure 1) that serve to unpack what teacher standards look like in

practice, and enable reflection on the effectiveness of that practice, as part of a collaborative learning community. These questions can be asked or answered by pre- service teachers, their peers, mentors or supervising academics. Davis (2000) found that self-monitoring question prompts aimed at encouraging planning for and reflection on particular activities helped students demonstrate an integrated understanding of science concepts. Cattley (2007) found the use of prompt questions to be helpful in developing student reflections on teacher identity. Reframing the APSTs from a checklist to a series of questions to be answered in, through and about practice, potentially offers a way to bring summative criteria into the lived experience as a means to provoke and challenge practice. The use of prompt questions or provocations for reflection have been shown to be effective in classroom contexts (Davis, 2000).

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies are a natural fit for education research as they reflect the complexities that are inherent in learning and teaching as well as provide an illuminating lens for lived experiences (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). In relation to the problem being explored through this study, a qualitative lens enables the probing of insights and ideas to develop a more informed, holistic view of the impact of structured conversation for PSTs. The particular approach adopted for this study is what Elliot & Timulak, 2005 term as interpretive. In this instance, this approach is

appropriate as it allows for a sharing of meaning-making practices, while showing how those practices can generate observable outcomes such as themes or recommendations. In achieving this, a single case study approach has been employed (Yin, 2009). In this instance to understand PSTs' developing reflective practice from their own perspective, case study research provided a way into valuing and showcasing their

voices. The subsequent grounded nature of the data analysis to enable these voices to be heard also contributed to decision making around the methodological approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

This particular case-study site, a campus of approximately 1600 students in suburban Melbourne with an ICSEA of 1030, was considered an ideal candidate for piloting the *Conversation Cards*. Previous experiences with the case-study school (Clemans, Loughran & O'Connor, 2017) revealed a summative assessment approach towards using the APSTs as the predominant practice. Despite initial information and conversations about how PSTs were being assessed against the standards, it was not until the placement was coming to an end that both mentors and PSTs began to engage in the assessment materials.

Participants referred to in this study are drawn from a cohort of PSTs (n = 80) undertaking their professional experience at the case-study school, limiting the generalisability of these findings yet retaining the diversity of experiences and opinions within a single context. Working within the restrictions of resourcing (e.g. printing of *Conversation Cards*), as well as captialising on the unique cohort model being implemented at this particular school (detailed below) and subsequent strong school-university connections, this site offered the conditions to pilot the use of the *Conversation Cards* as a starting point to a larger-scale investment and research process.

The following section will detail the context of this study, identify the participants

involved and how they were selected before describing the data collection and analysis processes.

Context

This project emerged from the authors' collective desire to support mentor teachers and PSTs alike to collaborate and elaborate on the practical demonstration of the APSTs that had been typically positioned as a summative exercise. Over a six-month period and many long discussions between the authors, professional experience supervisors, academics and PSTs, a set of six *Conversation Cards* were developed.

Each card has a number of prompt questions to be used to guide collaborative discussion and reflection between mentor and mentee, as well as with peers and as part of self-reflection, over different stages of a placement experience (e.g. initial conservation, prior to lesson, during a lesson, etc). In brief, the questions constituted an operationalised version of each of the 37 focus areas within the seven APSTs. For example, the focus areas connected with assessing student learning (5.1) and identifying professional learning needs (6.1) could be explored in conversation through addressing the following question: *Which aspects of assessment do you feel confident in and which ones would you like to work on and why?* Each focus area was touched on at least once, but some up to three or four times. A small funding opportunity enabled the professional design, production and printing of 160 sets of cards. By way of gaining initial insights into the functionality and impact of the *Conversation Cards*, the authors decided to pilot this project with a cohort of PSTs and their mentors in one secondary school (as detailed above).

Participants and their Selection

A cohort of 80 PSTs enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) with a disciplinary focus on health and physical education were involved in this pilot project. Each participant (and their mentor) was provided with a set of *Conversation Cards* and a background briefing from authors 1 and 3 about the intention of this reflective tool.

Twelve PSTs (nine female and three males) responded to an invitation to participate in a focus group interview towards the end of their professional experience, which adopted a distributed approach (e.g. one day based in the school a week) over Term 2 (approximately 10 weeks over April to June in the Australian context), to discuss their experiences. While specific demographic details were not gathered about each participant, they were all in their first year of the same ITE program, had entered the program directly from secondary school, and were experiencing their first school placement. They had received a briefing on the intent of the *Conversation Cards* prior to their professional experience and were asked to use them to engage in reflective conversations about their developing practices with their mentor. In this instance, purposeful sampling was indicated as an effective approach as only a limited number of people could contribute as primary data sources due to the nature of the research context, aims and questions (Suri, 2011).

Data Collection

The pilot nature of the study limited data collection to focus group interviews as an appropriate starting point for understanding the impact of the *Conversation Cards* on

reflective practices. Interviews play an important role in qualitative research as they serve as a rich source for exploring people's attitudes, beliefs, and insights into experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Focus group interviews (FGI) tend to be a more naturalistic data collection tool as they provide "a more natural environment than that of individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others - just as they are in real life" (Casey & Kueger, 2000, p.11). FGI allowed the participants to discuss their perceptions and experiences around the use of the *Conversation Cards* and relate this use to their development as reflective practitioners. With this purpose in mind, a FGI format was an appropriate data collecting choice as participants were encouraged to not only respond to the researcher, but interact with each other to support the emergence and discussion of a range of perspectives (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). This context reflected the collaborative nature of the professional experience. Two FGI were conducted with five PSTs in the first cohort and seven PSTs in the second. The approach to the FGI was semi-structured in nature and the questions reflect a flexibility and reflexivity to further probe the PSTs' emergent responses. The FGI questions were informed by the literature, but more so the authors' lived experiences working alongside pre-service and mentor teachers through professional experience over a number of years. There were five FGI interview questions including *What was your experience of using the cards to promote professional dialogue?* and *What did you see as the benefits of the cards?* Each FGI was about 45 minutes in length, conducted by either the first (FGI 2) or third (FGI 1) author in a meeting space at the focal school, at a time convenient to the participants, and was audio-recorded before being transcribed.

The first author was a former teacher and was involved heavily in the professional experience program associated with the case-study school. The third author was a teaching and researching academic with 19 years' experience in ITE and experienced in conducting interviews. This author had significant prior interactions with the case-study school, but much less so during this research. The first and third authors' involvement with both the PSTs and the case-study school likely influenced both the responses in the interviews by the students and interpretations of the data based upon prior assumptions. Care is needed in drawing conclusions from the data as it was likely that participants' willingness to talk openly about the *Conversation Cards* may have been impacted. To minimize the effects, researchers devised questions that were not leading, gave respondents ample time to respond, sought a range of opinions from participants and allowed for conversations to evolve.

Data Analysis

The intent of qualitative studies such as this is to allow for the emergence of rich, 'thick' descriptions of the phenomena being experienced (Merriam, 1998). Rather than informing the meaning making process with existing theories, the use of emergent interpretations is an appropriate way to approach data analysis steeped in grounded theoretical understandings of research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this case, the data set – the interview transcripts from the two focus group discussions – was scrutinised using an inductive approach. The second author was an experienced academic with considerable teaching and researching experience, as well as familiarity with professional experience, and offered their analysis having not conducted the interviews or been associated with the case-study school. The distance of the second author positioned them to analyse the data as more of an outsider. The following seven steps were used by the second author.
(1)   The transcripts were read in one sitting and notes were taken identifying key themes in direct response to the research question;
(2)   The transcripts were re-read to articulate the key sub-themes encapsulating these

themes;

(3)   The transcripts were revisited to locate quotes (ranging from two to four per sub-theme) that would exemplify the themes; The emergent themes and sub-themes were discussed with the first author, who conducted one of the focus group interviews, for their insights;

(4)   Following this discussion, the number of sub-themes were reduced and one quote best exemplifying and/or most succinctly articulating each theme was chosen;

(5)   These decisions were triangulated with the first author; and

(6)   The third author acted to critically review the analysis and interpretations.

The authors having been stakeholders in developing the *Conversation Cards* acknowledge the research process as interpretive and therefore their inherent biases and preconceptions influenced how data was gathered, interpreted, and presented (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Findings

Two key themes emerged from the analysis representing the reflective practices of the PSTs during their professional experience:

(1)   reflecting with their mentors, and

(2)   self-reflection.

This section presents illustrative quotes from the focus groups interviews to represent the impact of a series of APST-informed prompt questions on a small cohort of pre- service teachers during their professional experience. More in-depth insights into the opportunities and challenges inherent in these findings, in terms of their development as reflective practitioners, follow.

Reflecting with Mentors

Data provided insights into how the PSTs used the *Conversation Cards* as a resource to reflect with their mentor teacher (or not). From the analysis of transcripts, three sub-themes emerged - possibilities, challenges and improvements - that captured conversations around usage. Illustrative quotes are shared in Table 1 before being unpacked in detail below.

Quote number	Quote from pre-service teacher	PST identifier
Possibilities		
1	That steered conversation in the right direction. If you wanted to try to talk about one of the standards and you weren't quite sure about it, there were questions you could ask and speak to your teacher [about] how to meet that standard.	(Pre-service teacher (PST) 11, Focus group (FG) 2)
2	Because we even spoke about a couple of [the standards] that I hadn't hit in one of those debriefs, and then I was able to talk to my mentor teacher about it and prove that I knew what I was talking about.	(PST 10, FG 2)
3	I think because these ones are sort of questions with an idea behind it and a reason why you're actually asking it and research to back that up, they're really big questions to ask and they're probably going to provide really professional answers as well.	(PST 8, FG 2)

	Challenges	
4	[My mentor teacher] is just really busy with the Year 7s, I guess. She does give us time but not as much detail. She goes, what are you guys doing and we tell her, and that's about it.	(PST 1, FG 1)
5	I didn't honestly find it helpful in terms of talking to my mentor because for myself I feel like pulling out cards is just a really formal way and it kind of disrupts natural conversation.	(PST 8, FG 2)
	Improvements	
6	I think maybe if we had a day or time after school and we just sat down with the group of our teachers and spent time either using the cards or looking at what we needed signed and discussing it with them and they can give us feedback on how we've developed.	(PST 4, FG 1)
7	We all knew at the start that the teachers were getting them and the fact that they're not bringing them out, we shouldn't bring them out. Maybe if they did bring them out, then we might be inclined to use them, but I'm not one to bring them out if they're not using them. That's just going to make me look stupid.	(PST 3, FG 1)

Table 1: Pre-service teachers quotes illustrative of reflecting with mentors

The findings suggest that participants identified that the *Conversation Cards* guided them in how to speak with their mentor, which was useful when they did not understand a standard and/or how to enact it in their practice (see Quote 1). Equally, the prompt questions provided the participants with the language to articulate their developing understandings of the APSTs and raise their awareness of how they might be evidenced in practice (see Quote 2). Another possibility identified in the above quotes was supporting the participants to engage in deeper conservations about their practice, which heightened the potential for participants to engage in deeper levels of reflection with their mentor (see Quote 3).

Overwhelmingly, the participants revealed the busyness of their mentors and their inability to set time aside to engage in conversations about their practice as a significant challenge to co-constructing a reflective practice (see Quote 4). An additional challenge confronting the use of the *Conversation Cards* was when they were not used by both mentor and pre-service teacher in a systematic way. Pre-conceived questions have the potential to support conversations as PSTs can plan for, deliver and construct a narrative around implementation. Yet as an informal approach, the provocations were perceived as inadequate as they hampered participants' ability to have a more 'natural' discussion (see Quote 5).

The *Conversation Cards* as a series of prompt questions appear to have promise in supporting pre-service teacher-mentor collaborative reflection. The benefits of this tool were, however, diminished by lack of time with their mentor and a clearer structure for how the cards could serve as a reflective tool (see Quote 6). Additionally, the findings suggest that both mentor teachers and PSTs need clear guidance about the intention and use of the *Conversation Cards,* along with an agreement to utilise them if they are to support reflective conversations (see Quote 7).

Self-reflection

Despite the lack of substantive progress in the use of the *Conversation Cards* in terms of collaborative mentor and pre-service teacher reflections, there was evidence to suggest they supported participants to reflect independently on their developing practices. Three sub-themes around self-reflection became apparent: making sense of the APSTs, support during

professional experience, and preparing for conversations with mentors. Illustrative quotes are outlined in Table 2 before being explored in detail below.

Quote number	Quote from pre-service teacher	PST identifier
Making sense of the APSTs		
8	We had that early assignment at the beginning of semester where we sort of had to summarise [the APSTs] and I just didn't really grasp it very well. So, [using the cards] was kind of like consolidating my own understanding.	(PST 7, FG 2)
Support during professional experience		
9	We had to go through the report and looking at what I hadn't ticked off on these helped me to definitely make sure I got where I needed to be. Even where I wasn't ticked off obviously I wasn't quite sure where I was going, but these solidified what I had to do to get to where I needed to be.	(PST 9, FG 2)
10	I think they were useful for an at-home study tool. When you're lesson planning, it has the questions you can ask yourself and go, oh, I actually haven't done that. I need to add that in my lesson plan.	(PST 4, FG 1)
11	I think I used them after the lesson to reflect not only with the mentor but with myself. When I got home, pulled them out and had a read of the reflection and kind of thought about what happened that day. I didn't really pull them out much with my mentor.	(PST 12, FG 2)
Preparing for conversations with mentors		
12	For me, the main purpose I used the cards for was just creating ideas in my head and refreshing my own understanding of the APSTs so that when it came time to talk to my mentor I felt I had questions to ask or things to say about my teaching.	(PST 5, FG 2)
13	More one-on-one time with a mentor because I feel like at the moment, one day a week, we don't quite get the chance to have that sit-down time. But on the larger blocks of placement, where you've got a couple of free periods a week with a teacher, it would be really good to sit down and go through the cards and have a more in-depth discussion.	(PST 6, FG 2)

Table 2: Pre-service teachers quotes illustrative of self-reflection

In their first semester of study, the participants completed an assessment task unpacking the APSTs. The findings show that the *Conversation Cards* assisted in bridging a gap between these policy-based statements and what they mean in practice (see Quote 8). While this may stray from the focus of the study, this suggests that the approach was useful in better connecting participants with the APSTs, which subsequently impacted on their ability to articulate them in practice.

The quotes above uncover how the development of more in-depth understandings of the APSTs helped participants to engage with them in more informed ways, which was evident when completing their professional experience report with their mentor (see Quote 9). An unexpected outcome emerging from the data was the use of the question prompts to inform lesson planning. The *Conversation Cards* provided participants with a tool to challenge their thinking about lesson planning, identify gaps in planning and make adjustments (see Quote 10). Equally, the data suggests that the format prompted the participants to think beyond content and to consider the range of factors that impact the happenings in the classroom. From the participants' perspectives, the structure of the *Conversation Cards* also lent themselves to guiding personal reflection on their classroom experiences (see Quote 11).

The participants shared their trepidation in engaging their mentors in an in-depth reflective discussion. While the structure of the *Conversation Cards* provided them with a sense of being prepared and informed (see Quote 12), the benefits of this tool were diminished by lack of sustained time with their mentor (see Quote 13). This raises questions about the conditions required to benefit from this approach.

Discussion

In making sense of findings, this section provides insights that are framed around the research question: What were the opportunities and challenges a small cohort of first year PSTs faced during their professional experience when they were supported in becoming reflective practitioners through a series of APST-informed prompt questions? The opportunities afforded and challenges faced by the PSTs in using Conversation Cards to scaffold their development as reflective practitioners while learning to teach are foregrounded in this instance as a direct response to this question.

Opportunities

In relation to the opportunities provided by this approach, three key aspects emerged: (i) shared language, (ii) a framework for internal dialogue, and (iii) bridging the policy- action gap. Each aspect is examined below.

Educators, experienced or otherwise, continue to grapple with the APSTs and what they mean for practice. Ryan and Bourke's (2018) work unpacked the tensions inherent in their introduction with insights ranging from ambiguity to contextualisation. At their best, they pointed out that professional standards for teachers have the potential to be generative and to positively influence what happens at a classroom level. This study brought to light that one key way in which this can be achieved in the context of ITE was through the introduction of a shared language for PSTs and their mentors. In not overstating the data, it is important to note that this finding is limited to those PSTs' who were not reluctant to bring out the cards for use with their mentor teacher. For example, the *Conversation Cards* provided guidance in how to talk about practice, including the types of words and phrases that could be used to articulate thoughts, behaviours and actions as drawn from the APSTs. While in its infancy, the findings suggest that for those participants who used the APST-focused question prompts they had a point of reference to work from with their mentor and by themselves which helped to shape expectations and clarify understandings. In particular, using prompt questions structured around APSTs as resources empowered the PSTs with the confidence to leverage the *Conversation Cards* as a tool to take responsibility for their goal setting and growth, signifying what could be perceived as a shift in locus of control from the mentor to the individual.

The internalisation of practice is an important aspect of learning to be a teacher; an act largely achieved through reflection. Loughran's (2002) exploration of teacher expertise certainly highlights the role of reflecting on teaching experience as a way for PSTs to enhance their understandings and knowledge of who they are as teachers and how this might be enacted in practice. This notion of reflection, however, is often easier to articulate in words than it is to translate into action for all teachers, even more so for those learning to teach. This study revealed the role of the Conversation Cards as providing a framework for reflection. The participants reported using the APST-focused questions as prompts for their own internal dialogue and as a tool for considering what they could be paying attention to as they reflected

on their professional experience. This element speaks to an approach that provides explicit scaffolding and direction for the often challenging and implicitly understood practice of reflection (Pella, 2015).

While professional experience is undeniably still at the core of the learning to teach experience, the requirement to assess PSTs against the APSTs, as per the TEMAG agenda (2014), has had a significant impact on the professional experience landscape in Australia. The temptation to 'deficit model' such a requirement by viewing the standards as a summative measure of growth and development is understandable. This study suggests, however, that reframing the standards into accessible question prompts creates the potential to lead to more informed and meaningful professional experiences for PSTs. By providing a way to practically bridge the policy-action gap, the data highlights that participants' understandings of the work of a classroom teacher were enriched through using the standards to guide and inform both their own subsequent practice and their reflections on their practice. On the surface this is not revolutionary, but it enabled the participants to further monitor and self-regulate their development as reflective practitioners.

Challenges

The challenges inherent in this approach can be identified through these three elements: (i) allocating time for conversations, (ii) the implications of the mode of the professional experience as being conducive to conversations and (iii) in-service teachers' understandings of the standards. Each element is unpacked in the discussion below.

The allocation of time, or lack of, is often suggested as being a barrier to quality instruction for many teachers (Graves, 2010). This is particularly pertinent for those who act as mentors for PSTs. In many cases, there are none to little time allocations provided to the classroom teachers who are allocated, or who 'opt into' the mentoring role. The findings of this study highlight that lack of time with a mentor impacts the ability to discuss, challenge and reflect on developing practice. Graves' (2010) case study into successful professional experience stresses that the absence of allocated time to engage in professional conversations challenged even the most positive of mentor-pre-service teacher relationships. In the context of this study, it can be suggested that by not investing in the mentoring role through time allocation, the opportunity for PSTs to learn and develop their thinking about practice through focused reflective conversations is diminished. Given the constraints of time on many schools and mentor teachers and the already limited opportunities for professional development, it may be that time elsewhere needs to be freed up to develop opportunities for pre-service teacher development. Professional experience personnel or academics associated with ITE may be in a better position to offer additional support.

The PSTs in this study not only identified lack of time with their mentor as a challenge to engaging in reflective conversations, but the absence of consecutive days in the classroom to sustain these discussions. The distributed approach to professional experience (e.g. a day a week over ten weeks) may have had an impact on the ability to enact meaningful dialogic interactions around their learning and teaching.

Graves' (2010) study also highlighted that more sustained time with a mentor not only enabled PSTs get to know the mentor more comprehensively, but also to gain more experience and exposure to the profession. The participants in this study linked block professional experience (e.g. 10 consecutive days) with the perceived opportunity for more discussions. This links directly with Graves' (2010) conclusion that, in relation to the mentoring of PSTs, quality – the ability to have ongoing, reflective and layered discussions about practice - was deemed more valuable than quantity.

A driving factor for this project was to support a move away from the 'tick box' approach to assessing PSTs' practice against the standards. Emerging from the data, however, was the duplicitous role that the Conversation Cards played in being able to enrich understandings of the APSTs while also supporting the notion of 'ticking off' or achieving each of the standards. Talbot (2016) discusses the problematized nature of the APSTs in capturing evidence of learning and teaching for practicing professionals. Within Talbot's study, in-service teachers attest to the APSTs having little to no influence over their practice and that their focus was on the learner's needs, which does not "require a set of professional standards" (Talbot, 2016, p. 87). The findings from this study are particularly prescient due to the recent introduction of the teaching performance assessment (TPA) to ITE programming as a tool to assess PSTs' practical skills and knowledge against the APSTs in their final year of study alongside their performance during professional experience opportunities. The practice of viewing the APSTs as a summative style of assessment may be tangled up in in-service teachers' understandings of the APSTs as a set of statements to be adhered to rather than providing opportunities to act as a tool for discussion and reflection on practice. This study highlights the disconnection between how PSTs are being encouraged to view the APSTs through their ITE programs and how in-service teachers' relate to them.

While the data suggests that the cards encouraged a more formative approach to the assessment of pre-service teacher growth and development, this shift will take time and require professional development if in-service teachers are to view the APSTs as a tool for reflecting on practice.

Conclusion

The intention of the Conversation Cards was to support PSTs and mentors to engage in conversations about the APSTs in a way that practically linked standards to everyday questions about practice. This process, particularly the use of question prompts, then becomes one way in which PSTs can be supported in their journey to becoming reflective practitioners.

Previous research suggests that the APSTs as statements were not enough to meaningfully impact pre-service teacher-mentor teacher reflections in and on action throughout a professional experience (Ryan & Bourke, 2018). Indeed, anecdotally, these standards tended to become de facto summative assessment criteria in many cases. To respond to this concern, Conversation Cards, comprising a series of question prompts designed to elicit reflection (Cattley, 2007) were produced and distributed to both PSTs and mentor teachers immediately prior to a professional experience. In this pilot, the researchers wanted to see if the cards alone, with minimal prompting, would be able to elicit more detailed and reflective conversations about the standards from the perspectives of the PSTs, in the case of this particular paper.

Findings suggest that the Conversation Cards were not entirely effective in stimulating conversations between mentor teachers and PSTs. This intent was largely impacted on by the lack of any structured and/or focused time to have these conversations. In some cases, the question prompts themselves were not successful in generating reflective discussion as they were viewed by the PSTs as not spontaneous enough or too formal. Equally, the connection (or lack of) that mentor teachers had with the APSTs did play a role in the uptake of these conversational prompts. This tool did, however, provide some PSTs with support in engaging in reflective conservations with their mentors through building confidence via language support and promotion of different insights into practice. Surprisingly, the question prompts were also found to be useful in supporting PSTs to work autonomously during their professional experience, such as with planning and self- reflection. Further research is needed

to determine the potential benefits and impact of including a more structured introduction to the use of the cards for both PSTs and mentors and formalised meetings within the scope of professional experience for reflective discussions. The next steps for this particular project are to refine the Conversation Cards based on feedback from PSTs, mentor teachers and teacher educators. The use of prompt questions to structure professional conversation will again be piloted with data gathered from mentor teachers to further understand the effectiveness of this approach in developing reflective and APST- informed practices in PSTs.

From a bigger picture perspective, if these Conversation Cards, with minimal prompting of PSTs, are able to foster reflective practice they would offer a sustainable, easily implemented and cost-effective resource. Importantly, beyond this specific resource, this project opens up a conversation about the value of reframing the APSTs into question prompts to increase accessibility and usefulness in terms of informing and shaping PSTs' practice. While this study was small-scale and exploratory in nature, it does highlight what can be practically done during professional experience using existing measures to meaningfully and authentically support PSTs in becoming reflective practitioners.

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