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The Seductive Power of Teacher Standards and Alternative Forms of Self-Care

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ABSTRACT: The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) were introduced to the Australian teaching profession in January 2013. Today, a whole generation of young Australian teachers has known nothing but the Standards as the archetype of what a person must know and be able to do in order to be a teacher. The Standards have influenced the structure of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs, there is no doubt. Today, registration boards in every state and territory mark teachers' entry to the profession against the first two levels of the four tiers within the Standards – Graduate Teacher and Proficient Teacher. The second two tiers of the Standards – Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher – are voluntary levels, lionised for their capacity to shape the profession.

Perhaps what is most remarkable in this evolution of the profession in Australia is, firstly, how seduced the profession is by the Standards and secondly, how little use is made of them at the higher levels. Even though voluntary certification at the Standards' voluntary levels has been available for nearly a decade, less than half of one per cent of Australian teachers have been certified.

Why are we so seduced by things that do not really seem to make much of a difference? This article explores the seduction of the Standards and teacher standards generally. Alternatives to professional teacher standards and/or the re-signification of teacher standards are considered as ways for teachers to take hold of their profession in an audaciously reflexive way. It is only by taking control of their own ethical narrative that teachers can wrest control of the teaching profession unto themselves and provide the self-care that is necessary to flourish in this most human-centred of professions.

Introduction

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) were introduced to the Australian teaching profession in January 2013. Today, a whole generation of young Australian teachers has known nothing but the Standards as the archetype of what a person must know and be able to do in order to be a

teacher. In some ways, the Standards have been highly influential, for example, they underpin national course accreditation standards for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs (Australian Council of Deans of Education [ACDE], 2017). Today, registration boards in every state and territory mark teachers' entry to the profession against the first two levels of the four tiers within the Standards – Graduate Teacher and Proficient Teacher. The second two tiers of the Standards – Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALTs) – are voluntary levels.

The take-up of HALTs accreditation has been slow to non-existent, despite their endorsement by all Education Ministers across Australia in 2012. Some jurisdictions and their regulators are yet to even accept them as a credential. The Victorian Institute of Teachers and the Western Australian Department of Education have not adopted them; the Tasmanian Teachers Registration Board has only taken to piloting HALTs accreditation in 2021; in South Australia, HALTs are not recognised under the Education Act. There is some activity in the non-government school authorities' sector, but it too is limited. Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory have mechanisms for HALTs accreditation, but nationally there is still only a half of one per cent of teachers who have gained accreditation as HALTs. The narrative is similar in other places. In the U.S., the National Professional Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) provides voluntary certification. NBPTS-certified teachers have an impact on student outcomes (Horoi & Bhai, 2018) and certification develops the quality of teachers as leaders (NBPTS, 2015), yet only three per cent of U.S. teachers have been certified in over 30 years (NBPTS, 2015). Despite the weak uptake of HALTs accreditation, perhaps what is most remarkable in the evolution of the teaching profession in Australia is how seduced the profession is by the Standards. Indeed, the championing of teacher professional standards has global impetus (Halász, 2019), yet little sign of achieving the ambition of improved teacher status and student outcomes (Day, 2019).

Why are we so seduced by things that do not really seem to make much of a difference? The Standards are entwined with power when they are so strongly supported, rhetorically at least, by government and school governing authorities. They promise reward in HALTs certification. This article explores the seduction of the Standards and teacher standards generally. Alternatives to professional teacher standards and/or the re-signification of teacher standards are considered as ways for teachers to take hold of their profession in an audaciously reflexive way. It is only by taking control of their own ethical narrative that teachers can wrest control of the teaching profession unto themselves and provide the self-care that is necessary to flourish in this most human-centred of professions.

The Seduction of Standards

The rhetoric of professional standards for teachers brings a promise of expertise, quality, and status. In my study of the conceptions of the Standards, 71 teachers in a high performing school system, purposively sampled across experience levels, participated in semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour each. One participant resolutely expressed the value of the Standards:

> I think it's a valuable document. I think teachers need it; I think parent and students need to be aware of it, to understand the values of schools and education. Teachers need to be recognised as a profession on par with doctors, lawyers and accountants. (Taylor, 2016, p. 151)

The comparison of teachers to doctors, lawyers and accountants here betrays an underlying belief that teachers' status is nothing like that of the named professions, even though AITSL (2014) documents encourage the comparison. A consequential and unproblematic link between teacher professional standards and an increase in status has been made by the research participant previously quoted. This is typical of how it is presented in the literature about teacher standards (Call, 2018) despite the apparent failure of such an outcome in jurisdictions such as the UK and the U.S. There is no compelling evidence in the literature that the institution of professional standards has raised the status of teaching in the UK or the U.S., jurisdictions that have had professional standards for teachers in place for a longer period than in Australia (Mockler, 2020).

The Dispositions of the Exemplary Teacher

My research confirms the conclusion of a major study *Being a Teacher* by the Education Council of the Netherlands; namely, that teachers are highly aware of who are the most exemplary teachers in their schools (Onderwijsraad, 2013). This is a finding strongly corroborated, in an inverse way, by the extensive UK *Teaching Competence Project* (actually a study on teacher *in*competence) which found that teachers were highly attuned to the capacities of their immediate workplace peers (Wragg et al., 2010). The *Being a Teacher* (Onderwijsraad, 2013) report uses teacher-derived notions of the exemplary teacher to describe what it calls "personal professionalism". The point most apposite to this research is that personal professionalism derives from teachers' "personal values and *their conception of the teacher they want to be*" (Onderwijsraad, 2013, p. 13, emphasis added). Beyond this, *Being a Teacher* (Onderwijsraad, 2013) does not make explicit what are the elements of personal professionalism. It hints at the ontological dimension of personal professionalism when it notes that teachers "have a heart" for their students (p. 23) and when it refers to it as the "personal core" of teacher professionalism (Onderwijsraad, 2013, p. 32), but there is no explication of what that heart or core might contain.

In the context of my own research, teachers placed high value on the importance of relationality in teaching and did not feel that it found full expression in the Standards. As one teacher put it, the Standards do not ask the question, "Can you actually teach?" While the Standards may measure knowledge and skills of the teacher – things that matter – they do not measure *everything* that matters: "There is so much that's not on these pages" said one teacher (Taylor, 2016, p. 163). This sense was also expressed by another research participant who admired the elusive "exemplary" teacher, noting the quality of their dispositions in the classroom:

> I have sat in their classes and I have watched them and I have worked with them, I have team taught with them and they just have this vast array; just the way they challenge the students and their interactions with them and all those things, even when they are not

> that charismatic in the classroom, I find that they just have this—they understand. They just see it and they understand it, they are so switched on.
>
> When asked what is missing in the standards she noted:
>
> I don't know if they could put it in writing, could they? The natural, organic stuff that happens in the classroom? You couldn't, you just can't. What teachers do in the classroom . . . I just don't think you could put that into words. (Taylor, 2016, p. 163)

This last quote emphasises the difficulty that teachers themselves see in capturing what are the most important parts of *being* a teacher – "teacher dispositions". Some research has sought to categorise the special qualities of the expert teacher in the epistemological domain as "craft knowledge" (Ayres et al., 2004, p. 145) or "practical wisdom" (Onderwijsraad, 2013, p. 32). Other studies touch on some element or other of teacher dispositions, referring to them as values (Chong & Cheah, 2009; Hay McBer, 2000), characteristics (Strong et al., 2011), moral purposes (Day, 2004) or personal qualities (Stronge et al., 2011) in the affective domain. What is distinctive here is that these special qualities that were felt to separate the exemplary from the non-exemplary teacher were in the overlooked *ontological*, not the epistemological, domain. Understanding teacher dispositions as elements of the ontological domain conveys much more strongly the concept that they are quintessential to the personhood of the teacher. "Teachers are indeed people. Who you are is how you teach" (McCulla, 2012, p. 3).

Professional standards for teachers are lauded for their ability to formally define that which a teacher must know and be able to do to be a quality teacher (Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2006). Yet teachers themselves know that the best teachers are something more than the epistemological domain of what a teacher must know and be able to do. Teachers most strongly express a sense of personal agency when they identify the Standards as missing a human element at the heart of being a good teacher – dispositions like relationality, passion, a sense of vocation and love of children (Taylor, 2016). This recognition of the importance of the ontological dimension of the *being* of the teacher is an important finding, as it lends empirical support to non-empirical perspectives often discussed in teaching, that "we teach who we are" (Palmer, 1998-1999, p. 10; cf. McCulla, 2012, p. 3). It also strengthens the assertion that professional standards for teachers such as the Standards are overly-reliant on technical competencies, ignoring attributes in the affective domain (Monteiro, 2015). This is a problem because such a set of professional standards may diminish rather than enrich teachers, because they have an impoverished conception of what the exemplary teacher looks like.

In my study, one teacher expressed the view that the Standards were "probably a good thing" and another, "it's just the way of the world, I'm philosophical about it". Yet another stated, "I've accepted that it's just the way it is . . . it was out of my hands" (Taylor, 2016, p. 141). These attitudes reflect the view of Maguire (2014) who notes, "education policy works by producing sets of ideas that become part of the taken for grantedness of the way things should be" (p. 774). The Standards have become a part of the "documentary apparatus" of broader education policy in Australia, and as such are one of the "normalizing technologies" that have taken hold in the profession (Rabinow, 1984, p. 22). Many teachers come to desire the epistemological model of teacher that inheres the Standards and the compliance actions that necessarily follow, even though those actions alone limit the portrait of the exemplary teacher.

The ethical experience of teachers is not solely shaped by the teaching acts which they prioritise. Nor is it solely shaped by teachers' desire to do the "right thing" as determined by others and codified in the Standards, nor by the pleasure which conformity to the Standards brings. Rather, the ethical experience of teachers is an expression of all three – acts, desire and pleasure – working as part of a positive feedback loop that is self-sustaining (Foucault, 1985). The pleasure/power that is derived from compliance to professional standards is the sense of the kudos and professional rewards that will issue from adherence to them – the knowledge that one is an expert teacher as defined in the Standards. The pleasure/power of compliance feeds the desire which is perceived to be bound up in one's interests (Foucault, 1996) and so on.

It is well enough understood that the Western system of education is an "industrial system of schooling" that is "now exhausting itself and many people in it" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 44). Yet despite this awareness, teachers perpetuate the system's brokenness, because it is in their nature as loyal and committed professionals (cf. Sachs, 2003b, p. 183). Thus, their efforts continually patch up a broken system that, without their support, would have crumbled a long time ago. In keeping with this misplaced loyalty, more teachers than not have normalised professional standards (Taylor, 2016), inadvertently undermining the importance of the ontological dimension of their work and thus doing violence to the aspirations of the teaching profession. When teachers and other agents bound up in the ecosystem of standards are seduced by them, they run the risk of being complicit in the intensification of teacher work and an unproductive performativity – that is, a system of coercion and control that focuses on accountabilities rather than encouraging a culture of responsibility (see Ball, 2003).

Augmenting Professional Standards for Teachers

While a degree of resistance from teachers to the limiting effects of professional standards is apparent (Taylor, 2016), teachers themselves, in accepting the Standards in their current form, contribute to a hollowed-out portrait of what the exemplary teacher might be, with commensurate threats of negative impacts on teacher professional identity, and a more aspirational and agentic teacher ethical narrative. There is a need for teachers to become more reflexively aware of these dynamics at play generally in professional standards for teachers. The reflexivity encouraged by the Standards apparatus is not enough, as it is reflexivity only to the Standards themselves.

The means to enable teachers' conceptions of professional standards to lean more towards what might be termed, after Sachs (2003a), "active teacher professionalism", is a combination of strengthening teacher agency and facilitating a teaching culture where support of professional learning and growth is paramount (Sachs, 2016). For example, active professionalism is inclusive of teachers' responsibility to make fine-grained professional judgements to meet the needs of the young people they serve. These judgements are needed on a daily basis to cater for the kind of individualised learning called for by contemporary educational researchers (Zhao, 2020). When parents new to school education attend their very first parent teacher night with a kindergarten teacher, they want to know about teachers' on-balance, fine-grained professional judgements about their child. Is she a curious learner? Has she made friends? Is he an attentive listener? Does

he work well with others? By the time these same jaded parents attend their umpteenth parent teacher night midway through high school, teachers' comments are focused on marks, grades, curriculum, and subject content. The on-balance, fine-grained professional judgement about students' individual learning trajectory and their socialisation within a learning community is no longer a component of feedback – what happened?

The public face of teachers' work is in their role as a part of both their school community and at the same time a part of a larger workforce, both parts entailing significant public responsibilities and subjugation to policy. The personal professional dimension of teaching (where a teacher can be most agentic and actively professional) is in their own classes and daily engagement with students, colleagues, parents and school leaders. The public role of the teacher is constructed by the Standards, regulations, and the accountability expectations of government and the media. Arguably however, a higher ethical calling is a teacher's personal professional *responsibilit*y to the individual young people (and their families) that they serve. The professional responsibility every teacher bears is to improve the life prospects of every child under their care (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). Education understood this way frames responsibility as a "relational disposition" (McLeod, 2015, p. 4) with a moral purpose that speaks to the ontological dimension of teaching. International examples of the valorising of responsibility over and above accountability exist: Finnish educational success confounds policy-makers in other countries because it does not rely on high stakes accountability, but rather on a "positive culture of *trust, cooperation* and *responsibility*" (Hargreaves et al., 2007, p. 16, emphasis in original). There is not even a Finnish word for accountability – they speak rather of "collective responsibility" (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 30).

The resignification of public accountabilities to something akin to teachers' personal professional responsibilities has already been proposed by Sachs (2011), who suggests that the term "accountability", when promoted by the profession itself, need not be dominated by notions of quality assurance but is able to focus on consolidating quality improvement. Focusing on personal professional responsibilities, as opposed to outward-facing or external accountabilities, holds the greatest promise for effecting change and improvements in teacher practice. The question becomes (recontextualising the thinking of Judith Butler):

> Is there a way to submit provisionally and critically to such norms [as standards], and to do so in ways that change the norms themselves? Is it possible to inhabit the norms in order to mobilize the rules differently? (Butler, 2006, p. 532)

The resignification of accountability serves a powerful moral purpose – to shift the narrative to a responsibility to the masters that matter to the teacher – students, colleagues, parents and, to some degree, local school leadership. These kinds of concerns dominated in teachers' reflections on the Standards in my own research (Taylor, 2016). Teachers' resignification of the accountabilities in the Standards in ways which give prominence to the ontological dispositions of exemplary teachers is the means of saving standards from the neoliberal audit culture of accountability (see Power, 1997) in which they are currently trapped.

One possible solution to the absence of teacher dispositions in the Standards is simply to bolt them on. Any attempt to do that, however, would be an attempt to codify the human person that the teacher is always in the process of becoming in the course of their work. Such a

codification could only be achieved by "exclusions, bans, denials, rejections" (Foucault, 2013, p. 11). The exemplary teacher is an embedded and reflective practitioner, whose dispositions are nuanced by culture, context and circumstances. Codified dispositions would lose such nuance.

Teacher Self-Care Through Ethical Narrative and Audacious Reflexivity

What, then, might be the alternative to dispositions codified within the Standards? The answer lies in the professionalism that matters to teachers, and that is their active personal professionalism. In talking about "my" school and "my" classroom, teachers make apparent where their agency most clearly lies. Put in the terms of this research, active professionalism must focus on developing teachers' personal/professional dispositions in growth towards becoming the exemplary teacher. That professionalism will be boosted by a strong ethical narrative *by* teachers, *for* teachers, and *about* the teaching profession. Such a narrative would support teachers and the leaders with whom they work in schools to disrupt the current accountability narrative in teaching, to undertake a "performative resignification" (Niesche & Gowlett, 2019, p. 73ff.) of the Standards that reasserts the ethical heart of teaching and engages in a care of the self (Niesche & Gowlett, 2019, p. 52ff.). It is the nature of teachers' work that they are attuned to the politics of care in relation to students, but perhaps less so in relation to the way *they* are pastorally "cared for" by strategies, like the implementation of the Standards, ostensibly put in place to advance the profession. An ethical narrative for teachers needs to engage in ongoing exploration of and reflection on the teacher dispositions which enliven the heart of this person-centred profession, challenging the technical rationality of contemporary accountability and compliance mechanisms.

The concrete form an ethical narrative for teachers might take is beyond the scope of this article. Efforts have been underway in Australia and abroad, for example, in the published writing of teachers on "flipping the system" (Netolicky et al., 2018; Rycroft-Smith & Dutaut, 2018); and in the establishment of the Chartered College of Teaching in England (Peacock, 2019). In gaining the voluntary membership of approximately 26,000 teachers – just under five per cent of all teachers in England – the Chartered College of Teaching achieved in just two years around 10 times the impact that the Australian Standards have achieved, measured by the take-up of HALTs accreditation over nearly 10 years. The development of an ethical narrative is not just about establishing an independent College of Teachers or similar, and then writing an ethical statement (although this may be an important first step). Professional ethics cannot end with an ethical statement because any codified statement, of itself, will not engage teachers in the ongoing ethical conversation that is necessary to encourage the audacious reflexivity that will inspire them. Audacious reflexivity disrupts the risk averse ecosystem which binds rather than liberates teachers and their students. Audacious reflexivity might ignore the sign which says "Danger Ahead" because it recognises the sign for what it is: an obstacle, a hindrance, maybe even an irrelevance; but certainly something to be audaciously challenged, based on skill, authenticity, and a personally held principle of responsibility to the masters that matter – young people.

The transformation of trade unions into teacher professional associations in some Scandinavian countries has allowed them to play a role in exploring a teachers' ethics of care (see https://nls.info/en/). In many jurisdictions, however, the work and image of trade unions is so polarised that such an agency cannot do the work of professional leadership and this is perhaps the case in Australia. One direction that teachers in Australia might take is to explore the notion of a College of Teachers, by teachers, for teachers, which could contribute to the profession by providing a foil to instrumentalist professional standards. It must not be forgotten that leaders in schools have the capacity to create the conditions and provide the resources that allow space for change – and chief among these conditions and provisions is *time*; time for teachers to engage in reflective conversations that allow them to begin the work, at the local level, of creating for themselves a deeper, ongoing ethical narrative. When leaders do this, they provide the pre-conditions for teachers to take the Standards to the next level, moving beyond their immediate school setting to engage in bigger conversations that connect them to the wider profession.

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