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Teacher Professional Standards: Ownership, Identity and Professionalism
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Abstract

Internationally professional standards increasingly define professional identities, dispositions and career paths for teachers. Although some system for appraisal of beginning teachers has always existed in most countries where teachers undergo a formal training process, this has recently expanded to include undergraduate courses, beginning teachers and others right through to exemplary teachers with a full and successful career in teaching behind them. This trend is clearly evident within Australia with both national and state-based development and implementation of standards for teachers at different career stages. This new framework is referred to as heralding a ‘new professionalism’ allowing teachers to have greater ownership and control of their personal careers as well as the quality of their overall profession. By describing the development, implementation and current status and processes of professional standards for teachers within the state of Victoria, Australia, this paper proposes answers to many of these questions and sounds some warnings for teachers. A critical analysis beyond the rhetoric into the actual constitution, documentation and implementation of this typical professional standards system within Australia would suggest great potential for increased conformity and control. In fact, the product may well be a reduction in true professionalism for teachers.
Following trends elsewhere in the world (Cochran-Smith, 2001), Australia has also experienced the expansion of standards-based evaluations within education contexts from students to teachers. Primarily focusing on beginning teachers (MACVIT, 2000), the intention is for professional standards frameworks to encompass all stages of the profession and direct teacher assessment, development and advancement (DEST, 2003a). State and National propositions and drafts for standards are appearing around Australia with plans for more to come (ASTA, 2002; Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2003; DEST, 2003a). Apart from purporting to provide a better framework for conceptualizing teaching as a career, such professional standards have been hailed as a way teaching can help promote a ‘new professionalism’ (DEST, 2003a). The rhetoric surrounding the teacher standards agenda suggests the promotion of teacher ownership of their own profession through ‘distributed leadership’, ‘new knowledge’ and ‘transformational practice’ (DEST 2003a, p17). Professional standards are described as a ‘cornerstone’ of this new model. This paper considers the emerging reality behind this rhetoric as professional standards move into the implementation stages, particularly those providing frameworks for beginning teachers.

Broad political intentions and other stakeholder views are summarized in the *National Statement from the Teaching Profession on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism* (DEST, 2003, p. 4-7), a collaborative document compiled by a wide range of key stakeholders across Australia. The statement states, ‘Professional Standards for teaching should be the responsibility of, and be owned by, the teaching profession in collaboration with key stakeholders’ (p.5). Many within the profession have placed at least general support behind the notion of standards frameworks for teacher evaluation. This includes employer and union groups as well as professional associations. Some of the earliest standards frameworks were developed by Professional Associations, however these did not focus on beginning teachers, but highly accomplished teachers, exemplary teachers or teachers of excellence (ASTA, 2002; AAMT, 2002; AATE & ALEA, 2002)). Professional Associations too were driven by a notion of professional ownership. In its rationale for standards the Australian Science Teachers Association states, ‘It is vital that
the profession feels ownership of and commitment to its standards’ (ASTA, 2002, p. 4). The Australian Education Union (2001) also states that, ‘Standards should be developed by the teaching profession’.

Larger employer groups, or subsidiaries set up to administer their professional standards systems, began to emerge in the late 1990s. Many linked the standards agenda to teacher registration. One such was the Victorian Institute of Teaching (MACVIT, 2000). Typically these de facto employer groups also proposed ‘professional ownership’ as a key motivation. The Victorian Institute of Teaching, for example, claims the right to develop standards for teachers as an, ‘independent representative body of the teaching profession’ (VIT website, 2003).

The teacher standards debate is not new, with people such as Lawrence Ingvarson calling for teacher-led development and ownership of standards within Australia over many years (1993, 1995, 2000). International examples of professional standards also claim the right of teachers to monitor their own profession through standards frameworks. Such calls often cite examples of other professions or call on definitions and notions of a ‘profession’ constitutes as justification. For example, James Kelly (2000), commenting on the processes of the National Board for Professional Teaching standards in the USA claimed that, ‘accomplished teachers are the experts about teaching, after all’ (p.18).

In spite of this multitude of calls for professional standards to herald a new professionalism for teachers within Australia, and in spite of many agencies claiming to represent teachers in this development, it is not clear what ‘professional ownership’, or ‘ownership by teachers’ actually means in practice. Boston (2002) highlights this problem and explains that it is at least partially due to the ‘fragmented’ nature of the teaching profession. He adds,

Teachers indeed are rarely acknowledged as owning very much. Who speaks for the profession? Many would claim to do so – but few speak with authority across all the layers of practical, intellectual, sectoral, social and collegial experience of teachers (p. 10).
During the many consultations and forums sponsored by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training and summarized within their report on the issue (DEST, 2003a) many stakeholders were present to ‘represent’ teachers or at least the teaching profession. This paper will consider claims of professional ownership through such representation within a broader framework of teacher identity. Within the professional standards discourse a potential tension is emerging centring the notions of professional ownership, representation and teacher identity. Although examples cited are primarily Australian, this is not an issue unique to Australia.

To address the dilemmas surrounding teacher ownership and identity within the professional standards discourse within Australia, this paper builds on the work of Sachs (2001; 2003), Hilferty (2000) and Cochran-Smith (2001, 2003) and critically places their thinking into the context of this discourse.

**New professionalism and teacher identity**

On 17th July 2003 the Federal Minister for Education in Australia issued a media release that announced the proposed establishment of a National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership. The media release (Nelson, 2003) announced that the Institute will ‘be managed by the profession for the profession’ and will have five key functions including the ‘development of professional teaching standards’. Although the professional standards issue has been in the background for some time, this media release and the implications therein suggested a significantly higher profile for this agenda. At the same time a taskforce set up by MCEETYA, the collective Departments of Education from each of the states and territories, was asked to conduct a broad consultation to see if the professional standards agenda for teachers should be progressed, and if so, in what way. All of these consultations and commentaries also refer to the emergence of a ‘new professionalism’ in education in Australia (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003a, 2003b). These government reports were not instigating a new agenda, but rather responding to one that was already developing. In the previous decade, a range of professional associations had considered the issue of professional standards (ASTA,
2002; AATE & ALEA, 2002; AAMT, 2002), as well, many of the registration boards and teaching institutes around Australia had been developing processes to define and implement professional standards (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003b).

Multiple voices and actions across the profession during the late 1990s suggested general support for the notion of some form of professional standards framework within Australia. Although it was not completely clear what this framework should be, there was agreement about many aspects, at least at the discussion level. To focus the issue more, the National Statement on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003a), compiled by a cross-section of stakeholders within the profession, outlined the main areas of agreement. The statement also acknowledged a wide support for standards across educational sectors and groups within the country. The first agreed principle within this document states that: ‘Professional Standards for Teaching should be the responsibility of, and be owned by, the teaching profession in collaboration with key stakeholders’ (p.5). ‘Ownership by the profession’ has clearly been an agreed principle emerging from a range of groups (AEU, 2001; ASTA, 2002; AAMT, 2002; DEST 2003a). What is rarely, if ever, detailed is who ‘the profession’ actually comprises. Most of the standards being developed or advocated are standards for ‘teachers’, not educators, or the profession in total. If such professional ownership is to be valid surely it means ownership by those to whom the standards refer; that is, teachers themselves. A preliminary to this whole debate surely must be a clarification of who ‘teachers’ actually are and how they are identified within the broader profession of educators and educational administrators.

In her paper about teacher standards and control, Sachs (2003) questions:

Who sets the standards and how they are set becomes one of the sites of struggle between the profession and other stakeholders, and indeed more often than not it is omitted from the discourse. Whether or not this omission is intentional is unclear but it certainly has very clear effects, both in terms of the nature of the debate but also in terms of its outcomes. (p. 178)
When a broad number of stakeholders, including some with clear political agendas, claim to serve the interests of ‘the teaching profession’, should this be read as equivalent to the interests of teachers themselves? The authors of this paper suggest not. But it is those same stakeholders who call for ‘ownership of the profession, by the profession’ within the standards debate. In fact it is used clearly as one justification for the agenda as a whole to move forward. Boston argues that as teachers belong to a fragmented profession, others, such as unions, can only really represent them. He also says that ‘a mass profession which eschews distinction and diversity, which speaks for itself through proxy, remains adolescent’ (Boston, 2002, p. 11).

If it were to be assumed that ownership of the standards agenda meant owned by the teachers themselves, what would be the implications of this? Could it in fact even be possible or are teachers too fragmented a group? What is needed is further interrogation of ‘professional’ as opposed to ‘teacher’ ownership and the notion of teacher identity itself. The following sections of this paper will at least initiate this with reference to the literature generally, but also with referenced to specific standards systems being implemented within Australia.

**The teaching profession**

Included within perceived benefits from the development and implementation of professional standards for teachers are improved ‘accountability’, the ‘new professionalism’ already discussed and improved ‘teacher quality’ among others (DEST, 2003a, DEST, 2003b). These terms appear in policy documents and discourses surrounding standards without critical examination (Sachs, 2003). Supporters, including stakeholders contributing to the DEST statement claim that standards will enhance the profession and move it forward into a new era of professionalism (DEST, 2003a). The apparent agreement within the documents and discussions about standards can be considered misleading both because of the uncritical use of these terms and the politicisation of the process.
In Australia, because the standards have been set, in the main, by administrative agencies such as Departments of Education, they tacitly emphasise bureaucratic rather than professional controls over teaching (Sachs, 2003, p. 179).

Any critical reading of this document, *The National Statement from the Teaching Profession* (DEST, 2003a) should note omissions as well as inclusions. The agreed National Statement contains little detail on structure or content of standards, and less still about who should actually develop and control them. However, throughout, the rather ambiguous ‘ownership by the profession’ term occurs. Interestingly, the bureaucratic discourse does not speak of standards for the education profession, but standards for the ‘teaching profession’, or standards for ‘teachers’. Most versions and conceptions of standards describe a multi-level process starting with beginning teachers and ending with excellent, advanced or highly accomplished teachers (ASTA, 2002; AAMT, 2002; VIT, 2003; DEST 2003b). Clearly the standards are not to act solely as a gate-keeping mechanism for entry into teaching, something those beyond the classroom might legitimately have a valid interest in, as this often acts as the entry point into the broader education profession as a whole. Well beyond this, the standards are to guard over the teachers entire career (as long as it doesn’t move out of the classroom) and any advancement teachers may strive for within that career.

Apart from perhaps at the entry level, and that is debatable, standards as proposed are not incumbent upon all members of ‘the profession’, just classroom teachers. This is part of the problem of calling them ‘professional standards’. Cumming (2002) identified some key questions arising from earlier national standards consultation meetings, including:

- Who constitutes the profession and who speaks for it?
- What does it mean to be a professional educator? (p. 3)

Sachs (2001) also suggests confusion about the teaching profession and teacher representation:

There is no singular version of what constitutes professionalism or teaching as a profession that is shared by these diverse groups. This is despite the fact that each of these groups claims to be acting in the best interests of teachers individually and collectively (p. 150).
Stakeholders represented at the May, 2003 ‘National Forum on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism’ included such diverse organisations as subject and non subject-based teacher professional associations, principals associations, bureaucrats from each sector, state and territory, unions, registration boards and institutes of teaching, academics, and others, including classroom teachers. All thought they had a legitimate place in defining parameters for professional standards for teachers, most because that is the route through which they passed into their current roles, even though many had not been working in a classroom context for some time.

It appears that there is something unique about education and teaching in ‘profession’ terms (ACE & ACSA, 2000; Ingvarson, 1995, 2002; Boston, 2002). Teaching is described as a ‘mass’ profession that contains a great deal of internal diversity - the broader education profession even more so. Teachers have, at the very least, a multi-layered view of their professional identity.

The professional ownership and teacher identity link

The ownership question, particularly within the context of the development and implementation of standards, is too significant an issue to be ignored or left to bureaucratic expediency. It is after all a clear justification behind the entire agenda. Cochran-Smith (2001) commenting on the standards manifestation in the US noted ‘The standards movement…will arguably have more influence on teaching and teacher education than any other contemporary agenda or innovation’ (p.179). If this is even partially true, then the development, implementation and ownership of standards needs to be considered very carefully and teachers need to be careful about what they may appear to be supporting.

Apart from issues of legitimacy and honesty regarding representation, the success of the standards movement may well be dependent upon the involvement and goodwill of a genuine majority of teachers. Some commentators already feel that skeptical teacher attitudes will prevent any national standards process being welcomed by many teachers.
Underpinning this skepticism is a view that historically such things are always done to teachers, never truly by them (Ingvarson, 1995). ‘The question is whether the Australian education culture...will buy the model. My own feeling is that, given the collaborative nature of the teaching profession, probably not’ (Hayes, 2002, p. 4). This view supports the notion that, for many teachers, there may be some clash with pre-existing professional culture resulting in strong reasons for suspicion and potential rejection.

The nature and degree of teacher involvement has implications not just for ownership and management, or even acceptance of standards, but the nature of standards themselves. If the ‘owners’ of particular standards are not to be a mass generic group, of teachers and other stakeholders who have little more than a general qualification in common, how are the standards to be conceived? Teachers comprise, in fact, a range of specific subcultures within the broader profession of educators, and standards likewise should reflect the nature of these subcultures. Hilferty (2000) argues that ‘subcultures add an often overlooked dimension to teacher based notions of professionalism’ (p. 2).

Teacher subgroups that have some established identity, through professional associations for example, include attachment to a particular subject area (Geography teacher) or student age group (primary teacher). To be inclusive of such distinct identities, standards cannot be totally generic, although more generic standards may be seen as bureaucratically much less complex (and costly) to develop and administer. However, even if these identified sub-cultures could be recognized, this may be still only superficial representation. Sachs (2001) explores two common and very different teacher identities that manifest within the group, ‘teachers’.

The first group of teachers Sachs (2001) defines as having a ‘managerialist’ identity. It could be argued that this would be the most common of the two within the ‘stakeholder’ groups represented at forums and other meetings considering standards, as many of the participants, although once classroom teachers, now hold bureaucratic or administrative positions requiring a ‘managerialist’ stance. Given their career paths, that may well be the majority identity group represented. The second group she defines as
‘democratic/activist’. To develop professional standards for teachers that equally represent these two identity groups would be no small task, and, if the development is left in the control of those predominantly within the former, it is unlikely that they would in any way acknowledge or allow for the identity needs of the latter group; ‘...managerialists’ being more concerned with controls, performance indicators and managerial imperatives (Sachs, 2001). Perhaps this is one possible reason that, regardless of the rhetoric and assurances, many teachers are suspicious of professional standards as merely being standardised competency and performance assessment dressed in new clothes.

The conceptualisation of standards systems advocated within Australia is still bureaucratic even when teachers partly contribute. While in place, standards of the kind currently being implemented not only describe the teaching profession, they also define and limit it. Given that ‘activist’ teachers may well be the key proponents of change that is truly innovative, any standards system developed by others to monitor and control them will merely contribute to frustration and conformity. Cochran-Smith (2001) warns that one outcome of such standards systems will inevitably be a move towards conformity and away from innovation and change (p. 180).

Consideration of some of the standards that have recently been developed within Australia (ASTA, 2002; AAMT, 2002; VIT, 2003) would suggest that they describe ‘best practice’ as it now is, not as it may become in the future, even the near future. In part, they have the impact of freezing best practice in time. The more controlling they are, the more this will occur. However, this may not be the main issue. Activist teachers are also questioners who are more inclined to ‘rock the boat’ by opposing current practices. Within a predominantly bureaucratic, managerialist-designed standards system what of the teacher who wishes to actually challenge current practice and dogma? Standards may well be no more than a politically motivated move towards more controlled conservatism within the teaching profession. Cochran-Smith (2001) adds:

The emerging view of the reflective and knowledgeable professional teacher includes few if any images of teachers as activists, as agents for social change,
and/or as allies for social justice...there is little emphasis in the importance of new teachers’ learning to question whose interests are being served, whose needs are being met by ‘best’ school arrangements including new criteria that emphasize test preparation above all else (pp. 179-180).

Within political contexts such as those the standards inhabit teachers may not even control the language of the debate let alone its outcomes. Drawing on the work of Joe Lo Bianco (1999; 2001; 2004), discourses can be created and directed for political ends. The discourse about standards in Australia appears to be influenced by media release and bureaucratically inspired public relations writing. A cursory reading of these materials indicates a high level of repetition as seen in Lo Bianco’s research. Key terms such as ‘profession’, ‘stakeholders’, ‘effective’ and ‘by teachers, for teachers’ appear regularly (White, 2004). Strategic and insistent language use itself helps to define the agenda under debate.

If we accept that some of the representatives within the various forums at least are teachers, who do they truly represent? Sachs (2001) suggests that within the current managerial framework in education we have the emergence of ‘designer employees’ and encouragement of ‘designer teachers’ who ‘demonstrate compliance to policy imperatives and perform at high levels of efficiency and effectiveness’ (p.156). She goes on to say that ‘the rise of the teacher professional standards movement in the UK, USA and Australia can be seen to be more concerned with standardization of practice rather than quality, despite a public rhetoric for the latter’ (p.156). Although there is no information available to indicate how representative teachers are selected into the various strategic consultations, Sachs words at least should give rise to concern to any who would support genuine debate and representation within the professional standards arena.

**Manifestation of identity and control: A case study**

Most, if not all, organizations involved with standards development and implementation claim that there does exist true professional ownership and that this is ensured by teacher representation and organizational autonomy. Typical of such state and territory-based organizations, the Victorian Institute of Teaching was established to be an autonomous
body whose role was to ‘professionalise the profession’, partly through the development and implementation of standards. The VIT claims to be an organization that exists independently to represent teachers; ‘The Victorian Institute of Teaching is an independent representative professional body for the teaching profession’ (VIT website, 2003). The VIT website also explains that the council was established by an act of parliament and operates ‘under similar lines to the Medical Practitioners Board, the Legal Practice Board and the Nurses Board of Victoria’ (VIT, 2003).

A closer look at the composition and operation of the Victorian Institute Board places into question claims of true representation and autonomy. This is even more the case when this composition is compared to the other representative boards it claims to be based upon. The membership constitution of the Teaching Council of VIT allows for twenty members. Eight teachers and two principals are elected to the council. A further nine members are appointed by the Minister. The final member is the Secretary of the Department of Education and Training or a nominee. This would suggest a very representative group with considerable input from teachers. As part of the development of beginning teacher standards, the VIT also included discussion forums and other input mechanisms for teachers. Such forums were a part of the development process for the beginning teacher standards. Included in these discussion forums with teachers was consideration of the overall role of VIT. However, Hayes (2002) outlines potential tensions inherent in organizations like this.

One of the concerns expressed by teachers who participated in forums on the VIT was that they do not want the Institute to be characterized as a ‘standards enforcer,’ while recognizing that quality assurance about professional standards is one of the Institute’s prime functions. It will take a delicate balancing act of professional advocacy on the part of the VIT to ensure that the profession that it can deliver on the latter without becoming the former (p. 4).

The website does not say which members are the elected ones and which are not, but a brief biography of the current council members is provided. These biographies are somewhat ambiguous and unhelpful in determining if they are currently employed in classroom settings – a requirement to be officially registered as a teacher by this same
board. Many for example have multiple roles. An interpretive reading would suggest that only twenty-five per cent of the VIT Council might be people in a current teaching role that is predominantly classroom based. The majority group, about seventy-five per cent are administrators, including principals, deputy principals and bureaucrats. Typical teachers would not consider the latter group to be ‘their’ representatives. Add to this the fact that the Secretary of the Department of Education and Training (or nominee) is also present within the bureaucratic group, and is in fact representing the employer of about half of the council membership. The questions of ‘identity’, ‘representation’, ‘independence’ and ‘ownership’ in this context become very real indeed. How independent is a group, and the decisions it may make, if a senior representative of your employer is sitting within the group. This analysis is also somewhat simplistic in that it treats classroom teachers as a generic group, there is also limited information to base interpretations upon, however concerns must exist. Additional complexities arise if the true nature of teacher identity (Sachs, 2001) could be included in the analysis.

The Victorian Institute of Teaching website states that the VIT was set up ‘along similar lines’ to three other professional bodies: The Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria, the Legal Practice Board and the Nurses Board of Victoria. Using identity, independence and representation as criteria for comparison, what conclusions can be drawn from information available on the constitution of each of these boards? While the Medical Board in Victoria (Medical Board of Victoria, 2003) contains nine nominated members and no elected ones, only two of the nine appear to be employed part time directly by government agencies. While the VIT Council has bureaucratic representation in the form of a position allocated to the secretary (or nominee) of the Department of Education and Training, there is no equivalent Health Department position on the Medical Board of Victoria. The Nurses Board of Victoria (Nurses Board of Victoria, 2003) has twelve members. Nine of these are registered nurses, two are public representatives and one is a legal representative. Again, unlike the Victorian Institute of Teaching, no senior bureaucratic representative is included.
Of the seven members of the Legal Practice Board (Legal Practice Board of Victoria, 2003), none represent the Attorney General or Justice Departments. Why does the Victorian Institute of Teachers council need a senior bureaucrat? Teachers are not trusted to independently define, describe and monitor their own profession. Ironically the Victorian Institute of Teaching was established upon teachers developing ‘a professional voice that is independent, authoritative, collegial and confident’ (MACVIT, 2000 p. 1).

**Conclusion**

One critical and recurring call within the professional standards movement within Australia is for ownership by the profession itself. Clearly the implication is ownership by teachers. However analysis of consultative processes and organisations that have occurred thus far would place into question the level of any such ownership. Politicisation of the processes and language, along with questionable teacher representation, or even definitions of ownership suggests bureaucratic motivations and controls rather than representative ones. Claims of autonomy by employer and government linked organizations charged with the implementation and management of professional standards can also be questioned with independence clearly less than is evident in similar groups attached to other professions. The professional standards movement may well have been an opportunity for a ‘new professionalism’ for teachers within Australia but this opportunity is rapidly diminishing, if not already lost.

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