

Whose Standards – Theirs or Ours?

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Introduction

In the official information circulated about this conference, the following questions are posed: "What standards? Whose standards? What for?" These are critical questions when it comes to a discussion of teaching and teacher education. Invariably and quite properly, standards which are set for a profession will form the basis against which professionals are assessed in terms of their performance, their suitability and their impact. The standards which are articulated will also be reflective of a particular view of what constitutes the profession, its major purpose, and the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes which are demanded of its members. However, in an era where education becomes a consumer commodity in a competitive marketplace, the standards of the profession are not always controlled by the members of the profession. Indeed there is a growing trend for teachers to be controlled and constrained by strong though small central bureaucracies and to be directed in their practice by external stakeholders.

Status of teachers

Harris (1994) claims that

...the present history of teachers is one of decreasing status and control, loss of autonomy, destruction of health, worsening of conditions conducive to lowering of morale, and subjugation to increasing external control of schooling and curricula. Numerous accounts from many countries have detailed meddling with teachers' roles in attempts to commodify education and make schools instrumental agents of types of market-driven and market-managed social arrangements... [Teachers] are losing power and control over the basic conditions of their work. (108)

There have been ongoing debates regarding the status of teaching as a profession and these have been recorded in the literature of teaching over a long period. Robertson (2000) states that

Teaching as an occupation is important... historically it has been an important avenue of social mobility and employment for working- and middle class (typically white) women, although claims to being a legitimate "profession" have, over the long haul, largely been mediated and marginalised by both gender and race... Controlling the terms and conditions of their labour has never been a straightforward nor, indeed, unitary process for teachers. (1 and 3)

A profession can be defined by its purpose, its standards, the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes it embraces, and the cohesiveness of its members. A profession is subject to the formation and maintenance of standards which are set by its members, monitored by its members and changed as necessary, by its members. Members pay fees to belong to the profession and gain an identity by being part of that profession. The cohesiveness of teachers in a market economy where education is just another consumer commodity is endangered.

Teacher identities

Robertson (2000) notes that we now have "a number of new teacher identities... the teacher bricoleur, teacher manager, teacher entrepreneur and temporary teacher. The bricoleur, manager and entrepreneur arise with the imposition of the market and the restructuring of educational organisations" (209).

This fracturing of the identity of a teacher makes the setting of standards for the teaching profession tricky. Thus, for whom are standards being set – the bricoleur, the entrepreneur, the temporary teacher, the service teacher, or the teacher manager? Robertson further observes that “Different types of teacher workers now compete with each other for diminished public and private resources, minimising the possibility of any form of collective mobility project. In the new era of fast capitalism and fast schools, teachers will be placed in a new exploitative relationship with each other.” (213) The kind of fracturing and fragmentation that is discussed here acts as yet another threat to the professionalism of teachers and to teaching being regarded as a profession. Thus, the chances of teachers being in a position to control this situation and set the standards by which they operate are further diminished. Governments and other external public and private stakeholder groups will be able to utilise the fragmented and ill-defined nature of the teaching profession, and impose standards from outside the profession itself. Under such a system of external control it is not uncommon for there to be a discourse constructed around standards, efficiency, competencies, quality assurance, outcome, key performance indicators and many other such corporate concepts. Johnson and Reid (1999) claim that such a discourse as this

...privileges precise measurement and quantification as processes for procuring quality in human enterprises such as education. The capacities and qualities (or competencies) of “good” teachers are constructed by this technical/rational discourse. It provides a “norm” against which to judge teacher efficiency and a reason to intervene more explicitly in teachers’ work when it is judged to fall short of this norm. Similarly, all practices associated with teaching and its development are judged against the standards shaped by the dominant discourse. (192)

The study

In this study a total of 90 pre-service teacher education students in 2 Universities in Australia were questioned and some were interviewed or took part in focus groups. These students were both local Australian students and overseas students, predominantly Canadian. They were asked to address 4 questions:

1. What is your perception of your government’s position on the training of teachers in your country?
2. What are your perceptions of public opinion in relation to the status of teachers in your country?
3. What do you see are the challenges facing teachers in the next 5 years in your country?
4. What steps do you think could be taken to address these challenges?

Themes

Ranking and sorting

In addressing these questions several themes emerged which demonstrated what their perceptions are of teaching as a profession at this stage and also what they perceived would be the most challenging parts of their role as teachers in the foreseeable future. These perceptions obviously link to what the public perceptions of teachers are and what the professionals see as their status in the current social context. In an era where economic rationalist approaches to policy making prevail, and where resource constraint is central, the neo-conservative tool of “standards setting” will inevitably be

used. Standards allow for governments and then the public who elected them, to set down criteria for what they expect of professionals and then to demand compliance with these standards, whether or not they are appropriate. An example of the kinds of tools that are used in a market economy for ensuring that professionals are being compliant with policies is that of standardised testing and assessment. Participants indicated that they were concerned about the trend toward this form of ranking and sorting of students, especially those who are in the lower grades of primary schools. A response which recurred in various forms was that it is a matter of , “Convincing our government that testing of students at an early age (primary) is counter-productive” However, by introducing standardised testing, governments and education systems are able to make comparisons between contexts, create league tables which rank and sort schools as well as ranking and sorting students. Participants also claimed that “there is a conservative push for more ranking and assessment of students and schools” and that this was one of the challenges that they are likely to face within their professional roles. The corollary to this is of course that this also serves to effectively rank and sort teachers who are judged according to the results of their students and their schools. This suits the market and effectively imposes standards because there are rewards and sanctions associated with the whole process of standardised testing. However in a postmodern context where everything is revisable, assessment is at best problematic and at worst dangerous in some instances.

In this complex and shifting scenario, no assessment process or system can be fully comprehensive, incontrovertibly accurate or unshakably revelatory of the truth or essence of children’s learning or achievement. Indeed, the meanings and assessment experiences that some describe as authentic are problematic in several senses. For one thing, little is unquestionably or indisputably true in a postmodern world (Hargreaves et al. 2001, 58).

Standardisation

Another aspect that participants mentioned as being of concern in their responses was what they referred to as standardisation. This means that regardless of the characteristics of diverse contexts and regardless of the features of different cohorts of students or of particular teachers and their approaches, a standardised approach is to be taken. This also allows for comparisons to be easily made which in and of themselves are in fact relatively meaningless. In Australia currently, the Federal Minister for Education has indicated his concern that what is being done in school curriculum varies from state to state as well as within states. One would perhaps assume that this was to be applauded given the different needs, contexts, demands, profiles and demographics of the various contexts. However the Federal Minister is seeking to introduce a national assessment to be entitled the Australian Certificate of Education. This would, according to the Minister, allow him to check that the same things were being taught in discipline areas across the nation. One might ask, “Does it matter?” “Why does it matter?” What happened to diversity and flexibility?”

Standards

What the notion of standards means as a concept, varies dramatically from culture to culture and context to context. Hargreaves et al. (2001) claim that

One of the most telling criticisms of detailed, standards-oriented reforms (or those that possess similar characteristics and are labelled as outcomes based) is that they reduce the curriculum, and curriculum planning, to narrowly technical and rational processes, losing much of what should be powerful and engaging

in learning and teaching. (20)

The participants in this study indicated that there is a need for a flexible curriculum which allows for the needs and demands of diverse contexts to be accounted for. Standards or outcomes based approaches, rather than objectives based approaches, ensure that teachers will be locked into teaching to the test or to the outcome and whilst there may be various ways to achieve the outcome, the danger is that the pressure of meeting the standards will be so great that they will take the shortest, least creative and most teacher directed route. King and Evans (1991) state that

The standards and outcomes agenda, shifts the focus of teaching away from objectives for teaching to desired changes in students' learning. (17)

When there is an imperative, which is what occurs with outcomes and standards based approaches, rather than an expectation, which occurs with objectives based learning, the demands on the teacher change dramatically. There are degrees of success which can be achieved when objectives provide the basis for curriculum and teaching and learning. When it is outcomes and standards there is no such thing as a degree of success – one either can or cannot achieve the outcome. For teachers then there is an imperative to ensure that their students reach the outcome or standard.

There should of course be some accountability within the system for what teachers do and how they do it. However, when this accountability is taken to extremes as it appears to be in the current era where we are experiencing teacher education inquiry after inquiry in epidemic proportions, claiming that there is not enough accountability of teachers or teacher educators in the system, it becomes counterproductive, demoralising and demeaning to the profession as a whole.

Public perception

Participants expressed their anxiety about the effect of public perceptions on the status of teachers.

The public doesn't understand the multifaceted role of teachers... teaching is not viewed as a challenging job... most people believe that teaching is simply 9.00 to 3.30 and that teachers can only focus on the number of holidays they get. Teachers are extremely undervalued in society today both in terms of their financial state and professional regard. The public is too quick to scrutinise and criticise teachers... I don't think that there is a general awareness of the totality of the role. (Participant response)

Participants also commented on the effect that current government criticism of teachers and teacher education has upon the profession.

I feel that the government is constantly finger pointing at teachers for pitfalls in education. I think the Federal government gains political advantage from attacking teacher. I think those making the decisions lack the professional knowledge to make the decisions. They seem to go for the quick fix and not see the wider picture. Teachers are blamed for many of society's ills (Participant response).

The federal government in the Australian context is busy opting out of funding parts of the education sector such as universities, and in so doing, finds that it needs to engage in a culture of blame to take the heat off its own actions in this regard. This culture of blame that governments resort to when they are themselves guilty of social manipulation, is not an uncommon reaction but is usually something that is most

prevalent between elections when the public memory appears to be very short in terms of the promises that were made.

Teacher identity

In addressing the more detailed aspects of teacher identity, participants commented that teacher identity is "an issue constantly in the media therefore it is clearly a significant issue for Australians". Respondents also saw that teachers are "losing power over their basic conditions of work". This highlights the feeling that there is an external control over the work and standards of teachers and thus de-professionalises teachers. It also underlines the title of this paper – Whose Standards – Their's or Our's". Some respondents were more positive about the identity of teachers in the current era.

Public opinion has gone up as people have recognised the effect that teachers have on future societies. People are aware that teaching is a demanding job, and not well paid so that many admire teachers for their dedication. People don't always understand the degree of planning, commitment and effort required – on the other hand many people are very supportive of teachers and school communities and are willing to help in any way they can. (Participant response)

Within the context of globalisation and the rapidly changing nature of society and family, there is a need for teachers to develop a more global, and intellectually challenging perspective on social change. This is particularly important today because of the amount of student and teacher mobility across national borders. As participants indicated

You become more worldly... you see how education systems work and you take new ideas home

Compliance

If this is to happen, it cannot do so within a context of standardisation, constraint and control on the profession by outside bodies and agencies, de-professionalisation of the teachers and teacher educators, and a public and governmental barrage of denigration. Change is about people's emotions and feelings, more than it is about people's actions. Actions are easy to change as we all know if we have had anything to do with behaviourist approaches to teaching and learning. However, if real change which is pervasive and meaningful is what we want, it will not occur with sticks being wielded involving standards and standardisation.

In getting teachers to implement particular reforms, governments are often drawn to strategies of compliance and control such as legislation, inspection and linking funding and performance. Although control strategies sometimes work with short term imposition of change, their longer term effectiveness in places like Kentucky, USA... have been questioned (Whitford 2000).

More as imposition is heaped cumulatively on imposition, as in the more than a decade of educational reform in England and Wales, teachers appear to withdraw their interest and investments from change in general and even from their fundamental commitments to their work, as the scope for professional judgement is significantly reduced (Woods, Jeffrey, Troman and Boyle 1997 in (Hargreaves et al. 2001, 158).

This is the crux of what seems to be happening within the profession of teaching and teacher education. Threats, rewards and sanctions are being used, the most serious of which is withdrawal of funding, to attempt to bring about changes in the system and in the people of whom the system is composed. This will not work in any sort of pervasive, authentic or long term way and will inevitably alienate and anger people at

every step along the way. If we do not deal effectively with people's feelings and emotions and expect that the imposition of standards will do the trick, we are misguided and naïve in the extreme. However, our experience in Australia, based upon that of many other countries that have already trodden this path, is that governments are not bothered about emotions and feelings.

Although educational change can be initiated and imposed by heavy-handed edicts, only the deeper human capacity of individuals and schools can sustain reform efforts over time. (Hargreaves, 159)

The respondents in this study were also keen to emphasise that "teachers need to be appreciated and encouraged within their school communities. Teachers need to be provided with more time for meetings and discussions so that they don't feel isolated or lost". Thus in Fullan's terms "Capacity can be influenced by creating professional communities within the organisation" (in Hargreaves et al. 159).

Professional communities

In terms of creating professional communities which provide a context for empowerment of educators, it is important to allow time for critical reflection about the elements of teaching and learning. The ability to be flexible and to envisage ways to transform and renew contexts of teaching and learning is militated against by the imposition of strict and constraining standards. With a transformative, critical change approach to education, social and cultural diversity and difference are taken into account in pedagogy and classroom practices. Participants indicated an awareness of the need to meet individual students' needs and to cater for diversity.

Students [and thus schools] are becoming more multicultural... teachers need to cope with the diversity of students... teachers need to be sensitive to religious diversity in the classrooms. (Participant response)

Diversity and standards

It is the perception of teacher education students that within teacher education courses, we need to attract more teachers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to meet the needs of the changing population of students. A Victorian Teacher Education Inquiry Report "Step Up, Step In, Step Out" recommends that "...an essential focus in pre-service teacher education must be on the needs of a diverse student population, of which migrant and refugee young people are a significant part" (134). We need to educate all teacher education students, and particularly white middle class Anglo Australian students, who make up the majority of the student teacher cohorts, to work productively and sensitively with diverse populations which includes 'at risk children', newly arrived migrants and refugee children. In regard then to diversity, and the notion of standards, professional standards which recognise and celebrate diversity, rather than militate against diversity by creating a standardised approach which could be regarded as "one size fits all" are to be sought.

Professional development

In Australia currently there is evidence that teachers who enter the profession are leaving it after between 3 and 5 years of teaching. The inquiries into teacher education lay the blame, as is typical, at the door of teacher education and claim that courses do not adequately prepare students for the realities of the classroom and thus they leave. However, in the constraints of the past decade of neo-conservative new right approaches to education, the support for teachers which was previously

present, have been stripped away. This leaves teachers unsupported and under-resourced as they attempt to perform their work in an ever more complex and demanding context. In this study participants indicated the need for ongoing, relevant professional development for teachers.

We need professional development to provide us with the skills and knowledge to deal with constant change and innovation' As teachers there is an increasing need to learn ... there is an increasing need to attend professional development opportunities in order to learn...

Participants commented on the lack of professional development funding for teachers and school leaders of change processes. It is clearly not enough for change to be mandated at a macro level if there is not sufficient time and resources allocated for the life long learning of teachers. There are very few professions apart from teaching where a new graduate is expected to possess all of the same skills and knowledge as an intensely experienced peer. If we were to parallel this with medicine for example, a recent graduate would not be expected on their first day to perform a heart transplant though they may in theory know how to do it. They would be mentored with experienced surgeons. Whilst mentoring does go on at least, in the rhetoric of standards for beginning teachers, it is not necessarily always a positive experience for either the mentee or the mentor. In an era of intensification of the work of educators this adds just another burden to teachers. Nevertheless, this is a crucial part of what needs to be addressed if we are serious about viewing the concept of standards at all positively and authentically. Genuine support for teachers at all levels of their work is essential if standards are to be realistically set and met within the profession. By keeping teachers so busy that they have no time for professional development in an ongoing manner, outside bodies and agencies ensure that they retain the control of the profession and thus set standards which serve their own rationalist and reductionist ends.

The planning demands that teachers face are substantial... And where standards or outcomes are complex and sophisticated, this planning time often needs to be spent with colleagues so that intellectual challenges can be met together. In short our study shows that ...planning time is not an expendable luxury ... but a vital prerequisite of being able to work effectively with colleagues to create high-quality teaching and programming together. (Hargreaves (2001), 48)

Conclusion

Robertson (2000), noted that teachers have a new set of identities – teacher as bricoleur, teacher manager, teacher entrepreneur and temporary teacher. Our study has revealed that the new generation of teachers also see themselves as fulfilling a range of different identities and roles. Participants viewed themselves as needing to be flexible, broadly based, able to cope with diversity, multi-skilled, able to cope with and lead change and ready to take risks. Standardisation does not in any way support these notions of what it is to be a teacher in the current era. However, we are not saying that standards are not important and crucial – it would be ludicrous to enter any profession which did not have standards. The point here is, that if the standards that drive the profession are to be worthwhile, realistic, achievable and are to actually benefit the profession and its status, they must be set, monitored and reviewed constantly from within the ranks of the professionals. Governments have their own ends to serve and these rarely

coincide with those of professionals who understand the ways of knowing and the philosophical underpinnings of their profession. Indeed in Australia, Ministers of Education are rarely people with a background in education. We can vividly remember one state minister who opened each speech by claiming that if what he said was not quite right it was because he was an engineer and not a teacher. This apparently allowed him *carte blanche* to say whatever came into his head at any given moment and get away with it. Robertson (2000) claims that

Teachers' success in securing and protecting occupational autonomy is dependent on their ability to mobilise collectively and to resist pressures from the state, market and community not only to reconceptualise the pattern and content of their labour by the individuation of teachers' employment conditions. (188-189)

The use of standards set and imposed from outside the profession becomes a mechanism for controlling the industrial conditions of work and the professional organisation of teachers' work. It divides the profession by having teachers competing against each other in a market economy mentality whilst at the same time, they are exhorted to be collegial and collaborative.

The constant attack on the quality of teachers and their competence as has been referred to throughout this paper with regard to the myriad of teacher education inquiries, sets up a negative culture of blame which is counterproductive to professionalism and the development of a positive status for educators within the community. The standards which are set in order to bring educators to heel and ensure that they are under constant surveillance, de-professionalise educators in insidious and divisive ways.

There is growing evidence that the nature of the new governance structures will divide teachers as an occupational group as is the intention. The divisions will deflect the fallout of various political struggles away from the state. (Robertson 2000, 190)

We again ask, "Whose standards – their's or Our's?" and unfortunately at this point have to come down on the side of it being "their's" and not "our's". The collective lobbying of professionals and the mobilisation of educators to take control of their own professional standards is critical. Whilst outside bodies divide teachers and fragment their identities, mobilisation is of course controlled and rendered deliberately difficult. Robertson (2000) states

Different types of teacher workers now compete with each other for diminished public and private resources, minimising the possibility of any form of collective mobility project...if my analysis is correct, the rise of teachers as a professional class will be limited to the rise of more individualised occupational identities with their own vantage points and self-interested objectives. (213)

Unfortunately we are fairly certain that Robertson's analysis is correct. This challenges us all then to find ways to wrest back control of the standards of our profession and then to ensure that we begin to re-professionalise using the standards that we set, and thus stem the rush to de-professionalise teachers and teacher educators. This may serve to eradicate the plague proportions of inquiries that governments commission and hopefully allow us to spend the significant sums of money that these cost, on such activities as teaching and learning for students and ongoing professional development for educators.

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