

Professional standards: quality teachers for the future¹.

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Pre-amble and Introduction

Before I begin I should come clean - my training is in sociology and anthropology, I write about an activist teaching profession and try to model activism in my professional and personal practice. In this role I attempt to stimulate debate (something I hope to do today) about educational issues and revitalize the teaching profession as its reputation is diminished by the media and even our own members. I also attempt to build bridges among various constituencies interested in education through my research, teaching and service. Having now said this I hope that you will understand why I take the positions I do.

The idea of standards for the teaching profession has been circulating in education policy discourses and public debates in Australia, the UK, the USA since the mid 1990s. We need to see the rise of education policies in support of professional teaching standards in the light of broader public sector reforms which have sought to contribute to increased efficiency and effectiveness of bureaucracies through systems of performance management of staff, increased demands for public accountability, and increased regulation by central government. Such policy processes reflect government priorities which, as Mahony and Hextall (2000) observe, have been preoccupied with debates about standards which have centred initially on, “how these terms are defined, second, by whom, and third, on how improvement of effectiveness is to be achieved” (p. 8).

My presentation today is based on three assumptions: first, for standards to be effective they must be dynamic rather than static and be responsive to social and professional needs to support quality teachers; second, in their most strategic and far sighted form they can be seen as a touchstone for teaching as it moves into the future rather than an anchor in the past. Finally, standards are not value free nor are they politically neutral – they serve particular interests and they have effects. My intention today is straight forward. I want to challenge your thinking about teacher professional standards by highlighting different schools of thought on the why, how and where to of standards for teaching. In order to do this I organise my paper around three questions: i. what do teacher professional standards hope to achieve; ii. What type of standards will help to achieve an active and vibrant teaching profession, and iii. What role might the teaching profession play in contributing to the broad project of professional standards?

An uncritical gaze would suggest that, like motherhood, standards are in the best interests of teachers, students and the teaching profession, and indeed this may well be the case. Darling-Hammond (1999: 39) expresses some cautions about teaching standards:

Teaching standards are not a magic bullet. By themselves, they cannot solve the problems of dysfunctional school organizations, outmoded curricula, inequitable allocation of resources, or lack of social supports for children and youth. Standards, like all reforms, hold their own dangers. Standard setting in

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all professions must be vigilant against the possibilities that practice could become constrained by the codification of knowledge that does not significantly acknowledge legitimate diversity of approaches or advances in the field; that access to practice could become overly restricted on grounds not directly related to competence; or that adequate learning opportunities for candidates to meet standards may not emerge on an equitable basis.

The political nature of the content and oversight of teacher professional standards is often underplayed by taking as unproblematic the meanings and objectives of standards policies. This may be an intentional strategy used by policy makers to promote a neutral and natural view of standards as good sense or common sense. As Andrew observes, “in this era of standards, writers use the term in many different ways, seldom bothering to unpack the differences in meaning; standards become the answer to all questions. They are thought to provide the magic ingredient to restructuring all education” (1997:168). The very term has become a site of struggle between various interest groups – government bureaucracies, teachers unions and teachers themselves. Significantly but also problematically there is no consistency in the language we use to talk about standards. In reading the literature and policy documents the following are used: professional standards, teacher standards, teaching standards, teacher professional standards to name a few. These words do not mean the same or do the same conceptual or practical work. For example *teacher* standards are concerned with measuring teacher performance and encompass the work of regulatory standards, while *teaching* standards are about improving teaching through a developmental approach. *Teacher* standards place teachers as objects for measurement, while *teaching* standards focus on teaching as a process that can be improved.

Understanding the context and the nature of the debate

Standards regimes need to be examined within the context of broader public sector reforms – especially the imperatives for government and its instrumentalities to be more accountable and to have in place a system to monitor activities and outcomes. We are all too familiar in our own lives where we are working harder and having to be more transparent and accountable in our work practices. Seen within this light professional standards represent a dimension of the audit society (Power, 1999) and an aspect of audit cultures which currently characterise public institutions (Strathern, 2000). Regulation, enforcement and sanctions are required to ensure its compliance. Think about your own professional lives, especially about performance management, requirements for promotion and how you have to comply with child protection policies and you realise how much this is part of your everyday life as a teacher, whatever your role in the school.

Debates and initiatives regarding teacher professional standards have been concerned with two orientations: the use of standards to improve performance, and the use of standards as a basis for reforming the teaching profession. In some settings these standards have been imposed and used by governments as regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic controls over teachers, particularly as they relate to licensing and certification procedures. In other instances they are used as an initiative for teachers to gain professional control over what constitutes professional work. Its most positive reading is that “Recently developed professional standards for teaching hold promise for mobilising reforms of the teaching career and helping to structure the learning opportunities that reflect the complex, reciprocal nature of teaching work” (Darling- Hammond, 1999: 39).

A less positive perspective is taken by Andy Hargreaves (2003: 61) who suggests that the rightful pursuit of higher standards has degenerated into a counterproductive obsession with soulless standardization. ... Downsizing and standardization have corroded collaboration, depleted teacher leadership and reduced teachers' investment in their own professional learning – destroying the collective investment that is vital for knowledge-based organizations.

For Bottery (2004) standardization comes with its own particular problems. For him these are at the school but also the individual level. He argues “excessive standards through externally-imposed targets can negatively affect the aims and objectives of a school, reduce trust in policy makers, and depress educators' self concepts. ... Not only can targets deflect attention from the prime concern of an educational organization, but because of their ever changing nature, they can prevent people from being satisfied with their efforts.” (p. 91)

Darling- Hammond, Hargreaves and Bottery are silent on the impact of teacher professional standards on teacher professional judgment. Standards whose intentions are regulatory seek, in their most extreme form, to spell out and standardize professional practice in ways which eliminate the legitimacy of professional judgment as well as the need to use it as part of their everyday classroom practice. Regulatory approaches may, at their worst, be seen to deny the creative, intellectual and relational work implicit in good teaching, reducing it to a set of measurable attributes or behaviours. Everything about good teaching – from curriculum design, the adoption and application of innovative pedagogies, the development of appropriate authentic assessment strategies to devising methods of effectively differentiating curriculum to name a few is creative and intellectual work. Importantly, learning is about the development of relationship, and an authentic and effective learning relationship is one which is reflexive and responsive on the part of both teacher and learner. A learning environment which is transformative in its intent is therefore highly creative and relational and thus difficult to reduce to specific numeric targets as is implicit in some regulatory standards.

Developmental standards, which seek, on the other hand, to build and hone teacher professional judgment can effectively do so if they are used at the local and individual level to help teachers understand their practice and improve it. When this is the focus, conversations about pedagogy, classroom practice and so on become a professional norm.

For the individual, in a regulatory environment when the achievement of constantly changing external targets is made the overriding objective, morale can be dramatically lowered for such targets create constant feelings of *self doubt* (at having to replace carefully acquired professional judgments with externally imposed targets), *anxiety* (at having to constantly attain targets), of *guilt* (at being unable to achieve increasingly difficult targets), and of *complaint and blame* (as consumers are led to believe that the focus of their educational aspirations should be on dissatisfaction with producers' attempts to reach such targets) (Bottery 2004: 91-92)

Clearly then two sets of tensions are present. On the one hand, developmental standards give promise to a revitalised and dynamic teaching profession; on the other hand, regulatory standards regimes can remove professional autonomy, engagement and

expertise away from teachers, reduce diversity of practice and opinion and promote 'safe' practice.

The task of standard setting is clearly complex and problematic. It requires insight into the nature of practice and the values and beliefs that inform that practice. Mahony and Hextall demonstrate the complexity of the task.

In examining standards it is important to examine them for their clarity, consistency and coherence, as well as the values, principles and assumptions that underpin them. They also need to be examined in terms of fitness of purpose – are they capable of doing the work they are intended to do? And is this consistent with the broader purposes of their institutional setting? Procedurally, standards can be investigated in terms of their establishment and formation, with all the questions of accountability and transparency that this entails. They can also be questioned in terms of the manner in which they are translated into practice and the consequences, both manifest and latent, which follow. More broadly, there is a set of issues to consider in relation to the culture and ideology of standards as a widespread phenomenon operating across both the private and public sectors in England and elsewhere. (2000: 30)

Despite their complexity governments have been attracted to a commonsense approach to the use of professional standards. Standards are viewed as instruments for identifying minimum levels of achievement in various aspects of practice, to define what teachers should be able to do and what they should know, that is, they embody a "technical" conception of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Implicit in this commonsense view of teacher professional standards are three goals: first, to present an uncritical view of professional standards, to accept that the teaching profession will benefit from the external application of professional standards, and paradoxically, through the rhetoric of a professionalising agenda, use the standards as a strategy to control teachers and the teaching profession. The application of bureaucratic forces such as rules, mandates and requirements act as the means to provide direct supervision, standardized work processes or standardized outcomes to control or regulate teaching (Sergiovanni, 1998). Indeed what might be seen to be commonsense here has significant implications for teacher autonomy and teacher professionalism.

Developmental or regulatory standards

Governments in the US, UK and Australia have used debates and initiatives about standards in various ways to improve the standing and practices of teachers. Mahony and Hextall (2000) distinguish between regulatory and developmental standard setting. Regulatory approaches can be used as a managerialist tool for measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of systems, institutions and individuals. Developmental approaches provide opportunities for teachers' further professional learning, aimed at improving the quality of teaching throughout their careers. The following similarities characterise a developmental approach to teacher professional standards in UK, Australia and the US:

- A student centred approach to teaching and learning
- Systematic forms of monitoring for the purposes of accountability
- A view that teachers should be life long learners
- A commitment to teachers improving their professional knowledge and practice.

- Advocating the possibilities of professional learning communities to transform teachers' knowledge and practice

While regulatory approaches are characterised by:

- A focus on accountability
- A technical approach to teaching
- Monitoring teacher performance
- Compliance
- External imposition of the standards by a government instrumentality

That there are commonalities and similarities in approaches to standards should not be surprising. The practice of policy borrowing and the use of 'international experts' leads to a homogenisation of practice. While the local politics and priorities may differ, there is a common desire both to improve the provision of education to students and to make teachers more accountable for their practice.

In the UK, Australia and US both of these approaches to standards are evident, but there is an emerging drift from developmental to regulatory approaches to standards. In the UK for example, the development of the National Professional Standards (NPS) can be seen both as providing a centralised specification of 'effective teaching' and as the codification of relations between managers and managed (Mahony & Hextall 2000: 32).

In their most controlling form regulatory approaches to standard setting have many of the features common to what Hargreaves (2003) refers to as performance training sects. They do not permit alternative perspectives; they identify a number of truths of teaching effectiveness, they demand compliance, and total allegiance. Bottery (2004: 96) captures one of the most disturbing aspects of this approach.

... the belief that the job of the teacher is not to critique claims to better education, but to implement what they are told; critique if it has a place, has to remain at the level of implementation, and if aspects of implementation are designated as 'true', then these are not considered within the orbit of teachers' professionalism.

So much for an autonomous and independent teaching profession. Let alone an activist one!

Self regulation by the profession

If we take as given that teacher professional standards have at their core teacher learning and improving practice, then the logical extension is that teachers need to be responsible for that learning and be involved in the identification of the content and performance required to assure quality of learning. Who after all could be opposed to raising standards? (Furlong, et al., 2000: 151) Regarding the current situation Hargreaves (2003: 137-38) is not very optimistic. He argues that:

... as yet no body of professional self regulation for teachers and no government that established its terms of reference has had the stomach or the teeth to define, raise and enforce improved professional standards for all

teachers that are appropriate within a knowledge society. Unions are unprepared to let their members' terms of employment fall into the hands of another representative teacher body. Governments are unprepared to yield their grip on micro management and give teaching back to teachers. Someone, somewhere needs to find the moral courage and social ingenuity to break through this impasse.

I suggest that now is an optimal time for NIQTSL to take the intellectual and professional leadership in defining the content of standards and their oversight. Not surprisingly I would advocate that they use a developmental approach rather than a regulatory one.

While in the eyes of its advocates, teacher professional standards may well enhance the status of teachers and contribute to their on-going professional learning, nevertheless, there are likely to be costs which will have some influence on teachers' classroom performance, their professional engagement and their receptiveness to change. David Hargreaves (1994) describes the ways in which work intensification occurs in teaching. He argues that intensification leads to a lack of time to retool one's skills and keep up with one's field. It creates chronic and persistent overload (as compared with the temporary overload that is sometimes experienced in meeting deadlines), which reduces areas of personal discretion, inhibits involvement in and control over longer term planning, and fosters dependency on externally produced materials and expertise. Teachers are being required to be more accountable by employing authorities and communities are placing greater expectations and demands on extra curricula and pastoral activities. It follows then that a mandatory application of teacher professional standards on top of teachers' already heavy workload will make the task of teaching even more demanding. The danger with teachers accepting the challenge of using a standards framework as a source of professional learning is that they could become complicit in their own exploitation and the intensification of their work. Acceptance of a standards-based framework for teacher on-going learning becomes an ideological tool for teachers to do more under the rhetoric of increasing their professionalism and status. Hence professionalism under the guise of standards becomes a tool for employers demanding more of teachers. The implementation of a standards framework puts teachers in a double bind. If they do not have a set of publicly documented standards like other 'professions' then they are seen not to have the same professional status as those professions who do have these codified frameworks. At the same time, by undertaking professional development activities as outlined by Ingvarson (1998), they contribute to the intensification of their work. For standards to contribute to the on-going professional learning of teachers, participation in standards based professional development must be seen as an integral part of teachers' work and time must be allocated for this to occur.

Given this situation, a profession led initiative would be seen to be far more attractive to teachers. The challenge for those developing standards frameworks is twofold. First is how to accommodate the ambiguities and uncertainties of a changing and fluid education policy agenda while at the same time providing teachers and the community with clear guidelines as to what constitutes good practice. Second is how issues of teacher professionalism are debated and developed in order to enhance the quality and status of teaching in order to facilitate and improve student learning. How these are achieved takes the development of teacher professional standards into new and likely highly politically charged territory. Dealing with these challenges will require resolve, courage and political and professional care. Indeed it means that we think about professional teaching standards differently.

Being profession driven puts the locus of control on the teaching profession and teachers themselves. For its success it means that teachers will have to be mobilised to speak collectively and to develop strategies to work towards the common interests of the whole profession rather than focussing on sectional interests and agendas of small sub-groups. You will recall Hargreaves' (2003) criticism of the lack of action by government, bureaucracy and unions to give teaching back to teachers. Collective action (Sachs 2003b) acts as a strategy to take stock of what is happening in communities, schools and classrooms. People working collectively in such ways are able to motivate and sustain each other, test ideas, debate strategies and negotiate shared meaning about how best to improve the status and practice of teachers. This type of work has previously been undertaken by subject or professional associations. However, to be more effective a broader constituency needs to be mobilized. One in which teachers, community members and other interested parties debate and negotiate what are the purposes of standards and how can they be used to develop and improve teachers' practice and students' learning.

An Alternative Approach to Teacher Professional Standards

For standards to have currency among teachers and other education stakeholders there are two non negotiable propositions, First, standards need to be dynamic rather than static. As suggested earlier, the fluid policy environment, the rapid explosion in information and knowledge and changing expectations by governments and the community regarding teacher quality and performance means that flexibility and adaptiveness to uncertainty are critical. Accordingly, these standards are responsive to such an environment and as such they are never finished and are always evolving and developing. Second, teachers have a social and ethical responsibility to their communities and profession. Teacher professional standards when developed by the profession will be owned, agreed upon and enacted. Hargreaves (2003: 161) observes that when standards become a form of technical control the potential offered by them for professional learning and renewal is diminished. He claims:

Teachers are not the deliverers but the developers of learning. Those who focus only on teaching techniques and curriculum standards and who do not also engage teachers in the greater social and moral questions of their time, promote a diminished view of teaching and teacher professionalism that has no place in a sophisticated knowledge society.

Given my obvious preference for developmental rather than regulatory standards, what would these look like? The following assumptions could underpin a profession-wide strategy for teacher professional standards.

- The purpose of teacher professional standards should be developmental rather than regulatory
- Engaging in on-going learning in order to keep up to date with subject area knowledge and pedagogical skills should be mandatory. In most other professions, especially law and medicine, practitioners are expected to engage in a minimum amount of professional learning.
- In line with the above, the focus for standards should be context specific for teachers' particular needs. At different stages of their careers teachers have different needs and similarly, the context in which teachers work shape their professional learning needs.

- Representatives of various teachers' groups should have responsibility for the development and oversight of professional teaching standards. These should come from as broad a constituency as possible representing the various schooling sectors (government and non-government schools), different levels (pre-school, primary and secondary) subject area specializations, as well as principal professional bodies (primary and secondary), teacher unions, teacher educators, education employers as well as parent and citizen groups. The development of coalitions and alliances among various constituencies is power building to achieve social and political ends. (Sachs 2003b)
- Learning communities provide opportunities for teachers to come together in collegial cross sectoral and interdisciplinary ways. They provide the setting for teachers to discuss issues about practice and to share insights regarding their own practice with their peers. Importantly they facilitate the building of a professional community where levels of knowledge and expertise are extended and made public. (Bottery 2004, Hargreaves 2003)
- The content of teacher professional standards should encompass professional, practical and personal skills and attributes.

These assumptions complement the tenets of an activist teaching profession (Sachs, 2003a). I reinforce my earlier point that the development of standards for teaching is a collective enterprise of all of those who are interested in improving the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. We have to resist any attempts by those who define teaching too narrowly and work against those who advocate a 'teach to the test' syndrome of a narrow set of teaching attributes. We need to acknowledge that conceptions of good teaching are changing, and that the knowledge and research base of teaching and learning are expanding. This is all occurring at a time when there are significant cultural and social changes, which impinge on how competent teaching is defined and judged.

Professional standards for teachers which make the distinction between self interest and self control have significant potential to provide the necessary provocation for teachers to think about their work, classroom activities and professional identity in quite fundamentally different and generative ways. They also have the potential for teachers to develop a framework to think and talk about their work. Clearly both developmental and regulatory approaches can be seen to have their strengths and weaknesses. However, my preference would be more towards the developmental approach than the regulatory one. The expectations and demands of external accountability need to be balanced with the developmental requirements of teachers to improve their practice and improve student learning outcomes. To achieve this, teachers need opportunities to identify, debate and negotiate the form and content of professional standards. This should be done both collectively and individually. Teaching standards then could be seen as a centre piece for a profession that is mature and confident about its place in society. Such standards are developed collegially and overseen and monitored in a collective and professional way. Thus teachers are active in their creation and become activist professionals in their implementation.

It is crucial that these standards should not be seen as a government imposed regulatory framework, which promotes one particular view of teaching and what it means to be a teacher. Rather they are a means for teachers to develop shared norms and values about improving teaching, learning and establishing a professional community, through robust debate about the most effective means to achieve this. We need to acknowledge that the

establishment of professional control, rather than a reactive stance of self-interest will take time to develop and time will need to be made to ensure that this can happen. Imposing single best ways of teaching excellence, inevitably polarizes teachers who disagree into those who are good, right and strong and those who are bad, weak and wrong. (Hargreaves, 2003: 138)

Clearly then the development and implementation of professional standards which have currency among teachers as well as the broader society is no simple task. Indeed, while there are attempts to align the teaching profession with other professions such as engineers, architects and the like in terms of certification and registration, the uniqueness of the teaching profession must be acknowledged, as well as the various contexts in which teaching occurs. While any attempt to develop a 'one size fits all' version of standards may be attractive to governments, it may not be in the best interests of teachers teaching in remote areas, in difficult schools, or in multi-age settings where their competence will be judged on the basis of some idealized notion of what competent, or excellent teaching might be. There needs to be some flexibility regarding the form of the standards to recognize the fact that context plays an important role in influencing how teachers teach, what they teach and the learning outcomes of their students (Sachs, 2003b). Thus far I have differentiated between regulatory and development standards. Now I briefly turn to identify some opportunities offered by the promotion of developmental teaching standards.

Teachers need not be captured by or held captive to a standards policy agenda. Rather they need to grasp the opportunity for professional and intellectual leadership to ensure that developmental rather than regulatory standards inform the development and application of policy. This is a political project and it requires teachers to think and act differently – especially about their role in society. Moreover, at its core it requires that the wider community think differently about teacher professional standards and how such thinking can be used as a provocation to rethink practice rather than constrain it. A major challenge will be how to ensure that teachers internalize the values and norms implicit in the standards. To do this will require investment in time and energy. Professional learning communities will help to facilitate this if they allow teachers to feel that there is trust and respect of a diversity of views and opinions. This conference has begun the conversation about how this can happen.

In conclusion I want to emphasise five points: first, is the need to get our language straight – we should be talking about *teaching* standards not teacher standards, second, and interrelated, is my preference for developmental standards which I argue are in the best interests of the teaching profession which support and enhance quality teaching; third is a recognition that the implementation of standards regimes, whatever their form, will have effects, on both teachers' work and their attitude to that work, fifth, is that to ensure the values informing teaching standards are owned and internalised by teachers, teachers must be involved in their development and oversight. Finally, is the recognition that the implementation and monitoring of standards requires investment in time and energy by both systems and individuals.

I end this paper supporting the idea of professional teacher standards, but on the proviso that they do not lead to standardization of practice or of the teaching profession being controlled by the State. In thinking about teaching standards for the future we need to be able to answer the following questions: what do we want teaching standards to do – professionally and practically?; what do teachers need to be better at? Do we need to

differentiate between generic and subject specific standards? These questions provide us with a starting point for the next phase in the acceptance and take up of a standards agenda. Governments clearly need to invest in the teaching profession; similarly teachers also should invest in their own professional and personal renewal. A strong, competent and autonomous teaching profession is in the best interests of all of those working in the field of education, and indeed society more broadly. Teaching standards owned and developed by the profession will ensure that we have quality teachers for the future.

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