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Social Discourses on the Teacher Performance Assessment: Media Tales, Twitter Tweets and Leadership Surveys

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Abstract: This paper explores the introduction of the new Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) for graduate teachers in Australia. We investigate how the broader discussion around TPAs has been understood by multiple agents during an eight-month period from January 2019 to August 2019. Data includes legacy media, social media tweets and a survey of school leaders. The analysis draws on Bernsteinian (1975) theory about the way particular social relations produce differing sentiments of social unity. While eschewing a strict binary, legacy media was characterised by a mechanical solidarity which promoted the TPA as akin to a test. Contributions to social media and responses to the survey suggested an orientation to organic solidarity and a recognition of the complex inter-dependence of specialised roles within initial teacher education. These diverse social discourses carry the potential to influence the broader commission of what counts as graduate teacher quality.

Teacher Education Reforms

Within the Australian context from which we write, initial teacher education is under intense scrutiny, and rightly so (Hoyte et al., 2020). As Singh et al. (2020) explain, ‘everyone wants teachers of quality for their children, and everyone would accept that teacher education programs should be of the highest quality’ (p. 2). Early career teacher quality matters and the content and delivery of initial teacher education and the means by which aspiring teachers are deemed eligible to be registered for professional practice should be publicly defensible (Wyatt-Smith & Adie, 2018). The relatively recent Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group’s ‘*Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers*’ (TEMAG, 2014) report made 38 recommendations. Three recommendations centred on the introduction of hurdle tasks during the initial teacher education experience. The first recommendation was for a more sophisticated approach to entry selection to ensure ‘initial teacher education students possess the required academic skills and personal characteristics to become a successful teacher’ (Recommendation 10, TEMAG, 2014, p. 44). The second recommendation was for a ‘national literacy and numeracy test to demonstrate that all pre-service teachers are within the top 30 per cent of the population in personal literacy and numeracy’ (Recommendation 13, TEMAG, 2014, p. 44). The third recommendation suggested that higher education providers and schools ‘work together to assist pre-service teachers to develop and collect sophisticated evidence of their teaching ability and their impact on student learning for their Portfolio of Evidence’ (Recommendation 28, TEMAG, 2014, p. 33).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) responded to these recommendations, adopting (among others) the premise of the three hurdle tasks in a revised policy document ‘Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures’ (AITSL, 2018). Development of the program standards was a consultative process, drawing on the ‘expertise and vision of teacher educators, employers of teachers, those in the teaching profession, in schools and early childhood settings and the broader education community’ (AITSL, 2018, p.2). The standards were devised with eight principles in mind: impact; evidence-based; rigour; continuous improvement; flexibility, diversity and innovation; partnerships; transparency; and research (AITSL, 2018, p.3). At the enacted level, accreditation processes fed into institutional self-analysis and comparability between institutions (Alexander, 2018), and public reportage of evidence of standards (Bourke, 2019). Of note are the partnerships between initial teacher education providers, teachers and school leaders across a range of education settings (such as early learning centres and schools), employers, and jurisdictional authorities, and their ‘shared commitment to improve initial teacher education and work in partnership to positively affect student learning and graduate outcomes’ (AITSL, 2018, p. 3). This last statement from AITSL is important to our discussion for two reasons. Firstly, AITSL’s choice of terms overtly constructs initial teacher education as something that needs to be improved, rather than something *ipso facto* that should be continually evolving. Secondly, AITSL’s words give legitimacy to the multiple and diverse agents within the wide-ranging set of partnerships that contribute to the teacher education improvement agenda.

The remainder of this paper focuses on the roll out of the third hurdle task, something that has become known as the ‘Teacher Performance Assessment’ (TPA) task. The TPA task is a ‘reflection of classroom teaching practice including the elements of planning, teaching, assessing and reflecting’ (AITSL, 2018, p. 10). According to Program Standard 1.2 all preservice teachers in the final year of their initial teacher education program ‘must undertake and reach the required standard on this assessment to graduate’ (AITSL, 2018, p. 6). The TPA task submitted by preservice teachers must be moderated at the institutional level ‘to give assurances of the consistency of assessment decisions’ (AITSL, 2018, p. 6).

Australian higher education providers of initial teacher education have adopted a range of responses to the AITSL program accreditation requirements as they relate to the TPA. TPA development commenced in 2016 and has been continually revised on a regular basis. At the time of our research project, TPA development around the nation was still underway, with a small number of TPAs endorsed by AITSL for implementation. In essence, higher education providers may opt to develop a unique tool or adopt an established TPA.

An example of an established collective is the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA), led by the Australian Catholic University (ACU, 2018a). The GTPA is one of the first developed and has a large participation rate with more than a dozen higher education providers from around the nation including the TPA in an undergraduate and/or postgraduate initial teacher education program. As outlined in Factsheet 2, ‘[T]he large-scale nationwide Trial of the GTPA was completed in 2017. The Trial included the validation of the instrument, standard setting, moderation, and establishing the standard at the minimum acceptable level. The GTPA was endorsed by AITSL in January 2018 for implementation nationally’ (ACU, 2018b, p. 1). The GTPA is a text-based model where a pre-service teacher demonstrates ‘their ability to engage with the full cycle of teaching practice in a final-year professional experience placement’ (ACU, 2018b, p. 1). In this case, the full cycle is inclusive of planning, teaching, assessing, reflecting and appraising.

At the time of our research, another consortium led by The University of Melbourne had also achieved endorsement. The Assessment *for* Graduate Teaching (A/GT) combines

multiple forms of data and evidence, featuring video of teaching moments accompanied by written text (The University of Melbourne, nd).

Of the 40 plus higher education providers that deliver initial education programs around Australia, many are still progressing towards meeting the expected requirements for an endorsed TPA. As AITSL (n.d.) maintains, 'rigorous, consistent and defensible decisions are critical to the success of the AITSL's TPA services' (p. 6). Following agreement at Education Council in 2018, from 2019, all TPAs developed by initial teacher education providers must be reviewed by the AITSL Expert Advisory Group. Experts are appointed by virtue of their 'expert knowledge' of ITE delivery, 'technical expertise in statistical data analysis', or 'assessment expertise' including 'assessment design' and 'implementation and monitoring of assessments' (AITSL, n.d., p. 2-3). The mechanisms by which the Expert Advisory Group assess each TPA is publicly available in the AITSL (n.d.) documentation (pp. 8-12). AITSL also engages 'formative advisors' to provide advice to initial teacher education providers on behalf of AITSL (n.d., p. 5).

Discursive Spaces to Collect Commentary on the TPA

In this article, we investigate how the broader discussion around the new TPA task has been understood and legitimised by multiple agents active within a range of discursive spaces during an eight-month period from 1 January 2019 to 31 August 2019. This time period coincided with our university's first roll out of the TPA for one of our preservice teacher cohorts. Our aim was to identify how the TPA was understood by major stakeholders. Due to the rapidly changing ecology of media flows, and their affordances and limitations for sharing professional communication (Pendergast et al., 2019), we draw on three data sets: legacy media (print and online newspapers), social media tweets and surveys undertaken by school leaders.

Legacy media includes newspapers and digital extensions of newspapers that are in the main for-profit and funded via advertising and personal subscription (Painter, Kristiansen & Schafer, 2018). Australian education researchers have long lamented the frequently unfair and negative images of teachers in Australian newspapers (Keogh & Garrick, 2011). An international comparative study of newspaper representations of teachers found that in Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Oman and Bangladesh, teachers are often portrayed as caring practitioners, whereas in Australia media reports called for education authorities to set targets for teachers, such as student testing and 'other mechanisms to control and regulate teachers' (Alhamdan, et al., 2014, p. 498). At the time of writing, in Australia, legacy media still has a wide albeit diminishing reach. Another important fact about Australian legacy media is that the two national newspapers and eight of the state/territory daily newspapers are owned either by News Corp Australia (formerly News Limited) and/or Nine Entertainment Co (formally Fairfax Media). The remaining two state/territory daily newspapers *The West Australian* (West Australia) and *The Canberra Times* (Australian Capital Territory) are owned by Seven West Media and Australian Community Media respectively.

Given the dominance of Australian legacy media ownership by so few groups, and evidence of its seemingly harsh portrayal of Australian teachers and teacher educators, we included Data Set 2, made up of new types of 'hyperlocal media' (Canter, 2018), such as social media tweets. In an academic research manuscript entitled 'It's not all cat videos', Canter (2018) confirmed that social media tweets now cover a substantive amount of valuable news and commentary on professional topics. Rather than replacing legacy media, in current times, legacy media and social media co-exist in a complicated hybridised media

system (Nygren, et al., 2018). Given the dynamic flow of media commentary at this point in time, it was important to canvass both data sets.

We added Data Set 3, survey responses provided by school leaders. Earlier research on educators' engagement with professional matters found that many were rendered voiceless in the social media space (Pendergast et al., 2019). As a case in point, a Department of Education (Queensland) (2018) policy declared that disciplinary action would be taken 'when an employee's personal use of social media reflects seriously and adversely on the public service and/or contravenes the employee's obligations under relevant legislation, the Code of Conduct, whole of government or departmental policies and guidelines'. Each of the chapter authors in Pendergast et al., (2019) recounted that they knew of an educator who had contributed to social media commentary about the teaching profession and had been reprimanded by their workplace supervisor. Further research by Baroutsis and Woods (2020) demonstrated that when a teacher educator issued commentary on professional matters, they were at the receiving end of unsavoury tweets by those who hid behind cryptic @handles. In one case, the tweet was so vulgar, Baroutsis and Woods (2020) chose to paraphrase the tweet rather than report it verbatim. In another case that illustrates the risks of social media to a principal's professional reputation, a secondary school principal from the Gold Coast hinterland recently won a defamation case against two parents who did not agree with the school's enactment of a behaviour management process (Wilkie, 2020). Additional research by Exley (2007) and Willis and Exley (2018) found that some teachers had limited experience with managing social media or lacked the time and technical support to participate. For a number of reasons, educators often lurked rather than participated in the social media space. As the opinions of school leaders were important to developing our understandings of this topic, we included Data Set 3, survey responses collected from school leaders across a range of school sites.

Taken together, we examine the three data sets to better understand the content and the flows of the multiple discourses that are circulating during an eight-month period from 1 January 2019 to 31 August 2019 as initial teacher education providers attempt to quality assure the 'classroom readiness' (TEMAG, 2014) of pre-service teachers in Australia. Our aim is not to generalise across the three data sets, but to examine each in turn. Put another way, we wanted to know what was being said about the TPA by various stakeholder groups. To do so, we analysed who participated in each data set and what they said about the TPA.

Theory of Social Relations

To analyse the multiple circulating discourses, we draw on Bernsteinian (1975) theory about particular forms of social relations that have the capacity to produce different sentiments of social unity. The theme of social unity, while derived from Durkheim's historical characterisation of different forms of society (see Durkheim, 1982), has been given prominence in Bernstein's (1975) chapter on 'Open Schools – Open Society?'. Bernstein's (1975) point of departure was 'the shift of emphasis' in the principles of social integration in schools from mechanical to organic solidarity (p. 67).

- Mechanical solidarity is 'built on similarity. It presupposes this and preserves it through a strong regulation and repression of the individual' (Schiemer, 2014, p. 67). Mechanical solidarity is emphasised wherever individuals are assigned to a 'common system of belief and common sentiments which produce a detailed regulation of conduct' (Bernstein, 1975, p. 67). Mechanical solidarity is dominant when systems orient towards a collective conscience of common values and beliefs (Thijssen, 2012; Veitch, 2011). It was Durkheim (1982), the French sociologist, who explained that

when individuals from a mechanical society fail to conform, they are symbolically ‘punished’ until the shared values and sentiments are revived.

- Organic solidarity is emphasised when individuals achieve a relationship ‘to each other through a complex inter-dependence of specialised social functions’ (Bernstein, 1975, p. 67). This is not a nod to ‘egoistic individualism’ (Schiemer, 2014, p. 67). Rather, organic solidarity is dominant when systems orient towards the integration of specialized social roles (Thijssen, 2012; Veitch, 2011). In this way, social integration arises out of productive differences between individuals. Should the differences be deemed to be counterproductive, ‘the social control becomes restitutive or reparative in function’ (Bernstein, 1975, p. 68).

Rather than proposing a binary, we conceptualise mechanical and organic solidarity as being in a state of flux, but still relative to each another. As Schiemer (2014, p. 78) explains, ‘we are never entirely social, but neither are we ever simply ourselves’. When one sentiment of social unity is brought to prominence, the other sentiment of social unity is not dismissed in its entirety; there is always a minimum presence that is capable of being brought to prominence should the social conditions change. When both forms of solidarity share a similar prominence, the disparate discourses of mechanical and organic solidarity can interrupt one another (Perry, 1986), until one is heard over the other by one of the agents active within the debate.

The bias of the dominating discourses, be it mechanical or organic solidarity, constructs in preservice and early career teachers, ‘a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65). Specifically, we use the interrelated concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity to examine the underlying social cohesion inherent in various understandings of the discussions on the TPA task. We do so by asking the following analytical questions about the data we generated and collected:

1. Does the data emphasise a common system of beliefs which produce a detailed regulation of conduct?
2. Does the data emphasise relationships borne out of a complex inter-dependence of specialised social functions?
3. Does the data emphasise a range of relationships as per (1) and (2) above?

A positive response to question 1 denotes amplification of mechanical solidarity. A positive response to question 2 denotes amplification of organic solidarity. A positive response to question 3 denotes multiple social discourses are in circulation and competing for attention.

Data Set 1: Legacy Media

Data Set 1 was generated via a number of database searches. The first search used the Australia and New Zealand Newsstream (via the ProQuest platform), undertaking month-by-month searches between 1 January 2019 and 31 August 2019 to create an initial file of articles. The Australia and New Zealand Newsstream searches leading Australian and New Zealand newspapers, including the News Corp Australia (formerly News Limited) or Nine Entertainment Co (formally Fairfax Media) owned newspapers, *The Australian* (national), *The Australian Financial Review* (national), *The Sydney Morning Herald* (New South Wales), *The Daily Telegraph* (New South Wales), *The Age* (Victoria), *Herald Sun* (Victoria), *The Courier Mail* (Queensland), *The Advertiser* (South Australia), *The Mercury* (Tasmania), and the Northern Territory News (Northern Territory). In addition, the Australia and New Zealand Newsstream searches the Seven West Media owned *The West Australian* (West

Australia) and the Australian Community Media owned *The Canberra Times* (Australian Capital Territory), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and AAP Newswire as well as some other regional dailies such as the Australian Community Media owned *The Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania) and suburban weekly newspapers.

At the end of the collection time, both the Australia New Zealand Newsstream (via the ProQuest platform) and the Australia and New Zealand Reference Centre (via EBSCOhost platform) were used in a more systematic search for articles. The Australia and New Zealand Reference Centre provides search functions for all leading Australia/New Zealand magazines, newspapers and newswires and includes content from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The following terms were used across three deliberately separate searches, using quotation mark operators to keep search terms together and filter the results and the capital letters queries as indicated:

1. 'teacher quality', 'quality teacher', 'teaching quality' and 'quality teaching';
2. 'TPA' OR 'teacher performance assessment';
3. teacher AND standards AND Australia.

This broad range of terms was employed because the TPA is a new assessment task and discussion may not use the TPA or Teacher Performance Assessment title specifically. References to the TPA may use 'standards' and 'quality' in various ways, for example. From a greater corpus, a set of 143 articles were harvested that commented on teacher quality across all stages of the career span. Of these, 71 articles specifically addressed early career teachers, graduating teachers or initial teacher education. The refined set of 12 articles either mentioned TPA specifically or mentioned an assessment of classroom readiness more generally. Nine of the 12 articles fulfilled our brief of being legacy media. Eight of the nine articles were from News Corp Australia or Nine Entertainment Co titles, and the ninth article was from the Australian Community Media owned *The Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania).

When presenting the data from the legacy media, we use square brackets to explain an abbreviation or missing text, and an ellipsis in brackets to indicate that unrelated text has been removed. The two analytical questions were asked of the statements about the TPA in each of the nine selected articles, which enabled us to tag each as either orienting to mechanical or organic solidarity. We identified that seven of the articles mentioned the TPA either directly or indirectly and oriented to the regulation of conduct (mechanical solidarity) and building a collective consciousness. As Schiemer (2014, p. 67) explains, 'the more there is space for mechanical solidarity' the less space there is for individual autonomy. An example of the TPA being constructed as a mechanical response to teacher education is Urban's (2019, January 15) article in *The Australian* which reports:

The Education Council agreed in September to more reforms to ensure all courses met the standards, regardless of their jurisdiction, including the rollout of teaching performance assessments (TPAs) for graduates. The tests have been met with some push-back from parts of the sector. A recent TEMAG forum heard there was a lack of agreement from the universities as to the value of the TPAs.

Additional articles by Cornwall (2019, January 7) and McIlroy and Mather (2019, January 7) both quoted the Federal Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg as saying 'We have more rigorous assessment for the accreditation of teachers including demonstrated participation in the classrooms'. Fowler's (2019, January 8) article mentioned the 'professional standard tests' as an 'indicator of teacher quality' and Urban's (2019, January 15) article stated that 'universities are divided about the value and composition of teaching performance assessments, known as TPAs'. Hunter (2019, February 25) explained that 'trainee teachers will also have to pass a performance assessment before they can graduate'. Goss and Sonnermann (2019, July 1) reiterated these sentiments, surmising and opining that 'These are positive steps, but more needs to be done.'

In contrast, two legacy media articles mentioned the TPA either directly or indirectly and oriented to the complex inter-dependence of participants associated with the TPA roll out (organic solidarity). An example of the TPA being constructed as an organic response to teacher education is in Argoon's (2019, June 28) article in the *Herald Sun* which reports:

ACU [Australian Catholic University] has also developed a performance test, now used in 14 universities nationwide, which are collaborating to lift standards of teaching graduates. The Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment has been validated, or approved for use in universities across Australia with Latrobe, Federation University and RMIT taking it on. Prof Claire Wyatt-Smith said the classroom skills test was 'producing a culture change in teacher education'. 'You need to know the theory, but you also need to be able to apply that with diverse learners,' she said. Australian Education Union president Correna Haythorpe said she supported the student teacher classroom performance tests. (...) Education Minister James Merlino said as part of standards agreed to in 2015, all teaching courses would have the performance test. Universities select their own testing programs, with the performance component to be implemented for all graduates this year.

The only other article that oriented to organic solidarity was Jarvis' (2019, January 9) article in *The Examiner* which highlighted the University of Tasmania joining with 'a number of other universities' to implement the TPA.

Data Set 2: Social Media

Data Set 2 was generated via three searches of social media using the specific terms 'teacher quality' and 'teacher performance assessment'. The platform Social Searcher was used at the end of the data collection timespan. A Google Social Search of Twitter and Facebook revealed some posts about the TPA. Twitter and Facebook, however, have different social purposes and social structures (Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2017). They each carry their own means of participation and thus concepts of efficacy. From a comparative viewpoint, Twitter enrolls 'followers' who share a particular interest but authors and readers are not required to reciprocate (Pendergast et al., 2019). Twitter uses 280 character public push notifications and twitter users can opt for greater anonymity by using an avatar and a cryptic @handle that does not necessarily reveal their identity (Halpern, et al., 2017). Facebook, on the other hand, enrolls 'friends', thus forming a relatively symmetrical relationship of reciprocity between users (Halpern et al., 2017). Facebook allows authors the option of displaying their posts as private to their 'friends' or public and open to the world.

We decided to disregard all the facebook posts and focus on the twitter posts for two reasons. First, we could not harvest any of the private facebook posts about the TPA, and second, our searches confirmed that twitter had a greater number of public posts about the TPA. Two separate Advanced searches in Twitter, with the same two terms, were completed. A scan of all the social media posts located many references to TPA from international sources. This was not surprising given that a TPA or a version of a TPA has been institutionalised in various jurisdictions in the United States of America for some time (see, for example, Ingersoll, et al., 2007; Rudner, et al, 1987). After discarding the international references, three main clusters of posts directly associated with the TPA in Australia were identified. We report on each of these clusters in turn, using the actual @handle if the tweet was posted by an organisation or an individual who holds a public position, or using a pseudonym @handle if the tweet was posted by an individual who does not appear to hold a

public office. This was an ethical decision on our part. To avoid confusion and to add to the rigor of our work, on the occasion of the latter, we add ‘pseudonym’ in brackets.

The first cluster of tweets was generated around a GTPA collaboration day held in Brisbane on 11 April 2019. Four separate tweets were identified, one from @jcuCASE (James Cook University College of Arts, Society and Education) and one each from three individual attendees. These four tweets were similar in that they all affirmed the topic to be the GTPA and made mention of ‘collaborations’, ‘discussions’, ‘expertise’, ‘confidence’, ‘graduate teachers are high quality’, and ‘positive impact on student learning’. These four tweets were retweeted on 5 occasions and generated 18 likes. Together, those tweeting had 2093 followers and reached out to an additional 11 @handles who together had 81422 followers.

The second cluster of tweets was generated around a one-day seminar held in Brisbane on 12 April 2019 that focused on the GTPA and carried the hashtag #GTPAforum. The seminar title was ‘Future of Education: GTPA Collaboration for Teacher Quality and Learning’. The Queensland State Minister of Education, the Honourable Grace Grace opened the seminar to approximately 80 people. She acknowledged the education sector as a ‘sector of continuous learning’. After harvesting the #GTPAforum tweets, we dismissed those that were advertising or had cat and dog lover posts that used the #GTPAforum as a way of promoting their wares to audiences who were following trending topics. This left us with a corpus of 51 original tweets with 84 retweets and 204 likes. Together, those tweeting had 44 134 followers. The tweets shared research on the GTPA implementation, introduced speakers by name and a range of designations including personnel from school systems, teacher educators, educational researchers and preservice teachers. One tweet by @LizDrew affirmed that preservice teachers had shifted from asking ‘What did I teach?’ to ‘What did the students learn?’. Themes across the tweets included ‘collaboration’, ‘excellence’, ‘confidence’, ‘high quality’, ‘evidence’, ‘impact’, ‘moderation’, ‘authentic teaching experience’, ‘data informed’, ‘classroom ready’, ‘the role of supervising teachers’, ‘success by design’, and ‘consistent understandings’.

The third cluster of tweets were spontaneous rather than being associated with an event. One of the spontaneous tweets was by @preserviceteacher_last year (pseudonym) who responded to an original tweet by @SkyNewsAust, citing @tanya_plibersek (then Deputy Leader of the Opposition) who was advocating for school systems to work in partnership with universities ‘to bring in those high achieving students into teaching degrees’. One twitter user @mr_health_professional (pseudonym) offered a ‘3 prong attack’, including that he would ‘institute a formal assessment process for a teacher to gain registered teaching accreditation (as per other professions)’. The response from @preserviceteacher_last year (pseudonym) was that she ‘completed a Master of Teaching and Learning last year was a 2-year course included literacy and numeracy test and graduate teacher performance assessment’. The query from @mr_health_professional (pseudonym) was: ‘Was that part of the university degree? Or was the ‘teacher performance assessment’ an additional requirement?’. The explanation from @preserviceteacher_last year (pseudonym) was ‘Introduced it last year every one has to pass to graduate’.

Another spontaneous tweet involved @rayedish, a teacher educator, responding to a provocation from @dzyngier, an educational researcher, about a matter occurring in teacher education. @rayedish offered that ‘The standards are what’s currently influencing ITE right now in Australia. In NSW students cannot graduate unless they can demonstrate that their teaching is effective (using a Teacher Performance Assessment)’ (brackets in original tweet).

A final spontaneous set of tweets were posted by @lighthouse (pseudonym), a final year initial teacher education student who posted: ‘10,442 words and 49 pages later my Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment IS FINISHED AND SUBMITTED 😊’ and

‘ALSO my lowest ability student for my graduate teacher performance assessment (that I had to ensure improved over the 6 weeks I was teaching) moved up a level in the english groups. IM SO PROUD!!!! & proud of my teaching for helping her get there 😊’ (brackets in original tweet). The first and second tweets from @lighthouse (pseudonym) garnered 32 and 13 likes respectively. Eleven days later @lighthouse (pseudonym) made three consecutive tweets: ‘I PASSED MY GRAUDATE TEACHER PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT WITH FULL MARKS’, ‘IM GONNA ****ING GRADUATE’, and ‘THIS ASSIGNMENT IS LITERALLY MY LAST FOUR YEARS OF UNI IN 10,000 WORDS I CANT BELIEVE I GOT FULL MARKS’. These three posts accumulated 49 likes and 6 comments of support and congratulations.

All three tweet clusters highlight a leaning towards organic solidarity indicated by the complex inter-dependence of a myriad of participants, including supervising teachers, teacher educators, children in the classroom and the preservice teacher. We draw attention to @lighthouse’s (pseudonym) recognition that the GTPA contextualises and applies knowledges and skills acquired during the four years of the initial teacher education program in the relatively efficient space of 49 pages to demonstrate their impact on a student’s learning in subject English.

Data Set 3: School Leader Survey

Data Set 3 was generated via an anonymous survey undertaken by members of school-based senior leadership teams where initial teacher education students from Australian higher education providers were undertaking the TPA in November 2018 through to June 2019. The invitation to participate was distributed via email to school leaders who participate in teacher education industry advisory groups. They were also asked to share the invitation to participate, information and consent forms and the online copy of the survey with their networks. The researchers also sought permission to attend four professional gatherings of school leaders and to advertise the invitation to participate and distribute hard copies of the information and consent forms and the survey instrument. Twenty-five school leaders responded to the survey, including 20 Principals, an external school reviewer, two Head of Departments, one Pedagogy Coach and one Classroom Teacher. Years of experience as a teacher or school leaders spanned from 10 years to 40 years, with approximately half of the participants nominating that they had personally supervised over 10 preservice teachers undertaking a professional experience placement and had been a school-based professional experience coordinator for at least 50 preservice teachers. In this paper, we report on the following questions of the qualitative survey:

1. The sources of information about the TPA
2. Opinions about reliability of the TPA as an assessment of a graduate teacher’s ‘classroom readiness’

At the time of data collection, 17 of the survey participants had some knowledge of the TPA whilst 8 admitted to either no or limited knowledge of the TPA. Out of those who knew about the TPA, information flowed from a range of sources, including the higher education providers, the jurisdictional authority, the Department, the Principals’ network, another colleague or the preservice teachers themselves. None of the survey participants were informed by legacy media or social media. In relation to the question about the reliability of the TPA as an assessment of preservice teachers’ ‘classroom readiness’, eight participants provided an affirmative response, claiming the TPA was ‘data-informed’ and was a ‘detailed portfolio of work’ and ‘models reflective processes’. These eight participants, however, also had provisos, in particular that the TPA would need to be ‘externally moderated’ and that the

‘key is the quality of the assessor’. Ten of the participants were supportive of the TPA, seeing it as a partial contribution to an overall assessment of a preservice teachers’ ‘classroom readiness’. For example, the survey participants offered a conditional response such as viewing the TPA as a ‘contributing item to preservice teacher appraisal, not as a sole assessment’ and that ‘the assessment provides classroom readiness for planning, not necessarily classroom management’. One participant wrote ‘I am not sure if it does much to ensure these students teachers will be classroom ready’. Six participants declared to not have enough knowledge to provide a response to the question.

Although participants’ responses varied in relation to their depth of knowledge with the TPA, the school leaders’ responses reflected a stronger orientation to organic solidarity: it seems that the roll out was dependent on a complex inter-dependence of participants. Some participants were yet to engage, possibly because the TPA initiative was very new, or possibly because their school may not host final year preservice teachers and thus may not have been exposed to preservice teachers undertaking the TPA at their school site. Whilst organic models have been shown to have substantial benefits, such as being an effective conduit of information, at times, the inherent risk is that not all the participants receive the same message at the same time.

Discussion

All data sets show that these different textual forms – the legacy media, social media and survey data from 25 school leaders - are all actively producing and transmitting assumptions about the quality of initiatives in initial teacher education. We note the dispersal of orientation to solidarity across the three data sources. Our research demonstrates that the TPA initiative has been understood and represented through different participant groups and through different media in disparate ways. In the main, the legacy media emphasised quality in teacher education as being tied to a system of regulation. This version of mechanical solidarity ‘stands counter to any attempt at building an individual “personality” in initial education programs (Schiemer, 2014, p. 67). The legacy media promotes cohesion in initial teacher education and the duty of solidarity. In contrast, the social media texts and the survey responses from school leaders emphasises relationships borne out of a complex inter-dependence of specialised social functions. Such an understanding ‘replaces the similarities between individuals with an increased specialisation or division of labour, necessary to achieve goals which are progressively diversified and complex’ (Vjera, 2018, p. 80).

Each data set holds the potential to create its own ‘echo chamber’ (Baroutsis & Woods, 2020, p. 297), thereby re-producing and re-transmitting its own assumptions. This analysis gives us some insight into how the public at large, preservice teachers and school leaders might find out about and form an opinion about initiatives in teacher education. In addition, our work demonstrates that different agents are active and able to exercise their agency in different spaces. Whilst the literature review in an earlier section of this paper suggested teachers and school employers were often rendered voiceless in the social media space, we found data that showed that social media empowered some other participant groups such as seminar presenters and preservice teachers. We are conscious that these preservice teachers are on the cusp of graduation, registration, and entering the profession as early career teachers, upon which time, they too will be subjected to the mechanical solidarity of the code of conduct controlling the behaviour of school teachers and the leadership teams. The survey, on the other hand, seems a useful means for garnering the insights, opinions and expertise of school leaders about the work of teachers and initial teacher education and provides a safe and an anonymous platform for this group of stakeholders to have a voice.

Our approach across three data collection sites shows the fast paced and complex dynamics of media communications about new initiatives in initial teacher education. No one system of communication conceptualised the complex inter-dependence of the reform in its entirety. It also shows that the creators of the professional standards and the various TPAs are not the sole gatekeepers of communication; public individuals and private individuals have established their role as influencers who construct and share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives. Higher education providers, government agencies, teacher employers, and preservice teachers themselves should be ready for the possibilities that may emerge. For example, agents can be involved in a more conscious set of communication about the continuous improvement agenda in initial teacher education, responding to the bias in the legacy media that promote teachers' work and quality in initial teacher education as being able to be standardised, as well as seminar presenters and preservice teachers being more proactive in the social media spaces that they inhabit. The role of employers and the code of conduct policies that limit teachers and school leaders from being active contributors in this public discussion warrants close attention. A priority needs to be given to further research on the relationship between reforms in initial teacher education and teaching quality and the role of legacy and social medias and surveys across other stakeholder groups. It is not enough to institute the reform in initial teacher education; a timely and thoughtful communication strategy is of great urgency.

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