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Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: Perspectives of Western Australian Primary School Teachers

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigated the perspectives of Western Australian teachers at the Proficient career stage on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), or ‘the Standards’. Fifteen teachers from five independent schools participated in semi-structured interviews and five themes were identified, under the broad categories of Strengths and Challenges of the Standards. Strengths identified were that the Standards support professional practice and career development and are user-friendly. Challenges identified were that the Standards can present challenges to professional practice and are problematic in the way that they are presented. Importantly, participants felt that the Standards ignored important social and relational teacher qualities.

Introduction

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), or “the Standards”, first introduced in 2011 and updated in 2018, were designed to support the performance and professional learning of teachers across four career stages through descriptors designed to help teachers reflect on and discuss their practices, identify their professional learning needs, and assess and evidence improvements in their practice (AITSL, 2011a). There are 37 focus areas under three domains (professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement) and seven standards. The standards are also intended to be the basis for national consistency in accrediting initial teacher education programs, registration of teachers at the Proficient career stage, and certification of exemplary teacher practice at the Highly Accomplished and Lead career stages (AITSL, 2011b). It is noted that certification at the Highly Accomplished and Lead stage is voluntary for teachers who wish to achieve formal recognition of their expertise. In summary, the Standards purport to represent a description of effective, contemporary practice by teachers in Australia with a view to increasing teacher quality (AITSL, 2011a). Although considerable research has been conducted on the implementation and impact of the Standards, there has been less research focusing on understanding the Standards from the perspective of teachers at the Proficient teacher stage, which is the focus of this qualitative study.

Review of the Literature

The development and implementation of teacher professional standards has been mooted as a crucial driver for improving teacher quality (Allard, & Doecker, 2014; Forde et al., 2016), although it is acknowledged there are other factors apart from the quality of the

teacher or teaching that affect student outcomes, such as socio-educational factors (Berliner & Glass, 2014). The government-initiated Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) sponsors the Standards in Australia at the national level, which are implemented at the State level where teachers are registered. In Western Australia, the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA) is responsible for the registration of teachers.

Potential Benefits of Professional Standards for Teachers

Advocates of professional standards for teachers argue that standards can provide a formal structure by which the teaching profession can define itself whilst acknowledging that teachers' work is complex (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Research suggests several potential benefits of professional standards, including empowerment of teachers, a focus upon the work of teachers, a 'language' and framework by which to talk about teaching, and a supportive framework for preservice teachers (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017; Clinton et al., 2015; Loughland & Ellis, 2016).

In Australia, Adoniou and Gallagher's (2017) qualitative study of teachers' and principals' attitudes towards the Standards reported positive results regarding practitioner engagement. Researching 36 teachers and principals over a 12-month period across five primary and secondary government, Catholic and Independent school sites, the study found that a sense of teacher ownership of the Standards and their implementation contributed to a positive regard for them. The research identified that it is important that teachers are encouraged and acknowledged as they increase their expertise and impact throughout their careers. Within the five sites there were many examples of "agency, where schools and teachers personalised the use of the Standards to better reflect their own contextual needs, in ways which are characterised as positive and empowering" (p. 118). The potential of teacher standards as a tool for promoting professional learning was also noted.

The Standards can constitute an explicit framework for teaching was also identified in Loughland and Ellis' (2016) mixed methods study. Their study, consisting of 229 preservice teachers during their practicums, found the majority of the participating preservice teachers were positive about the developmental function of the Standards in guiding and supporting their professional learning. This was despite their supervising/mentor teachers not necessarily being *au fait* with the Standards at that time. Similarly, Clarke and Moore's (2013) investigation of preservice teachers identified that the Standards can provide an explicit framework for teachers to guide their practice as they progress through their careers. This research identified that the Standards can provide increased transparency for pre-service teachers, rendering criteria against which they would be evaluated explicit so that the Standards "can be seen to make teaching and its evaluation more transparent, predictable, and efficient" (p. 489).

In contrast to concerns raised by Moore and Atkinson (1998) that teacher standards could lead to decontextualised and individualistic approaches to teaching, Adoniou and Gallagher (2017) identified a clear theme of collegiality such that: "their introduction, and the attendant requirement to gather evidence of teaching practice and student learning, had prompted changes in the ways new educators are supported and provided a common language and focal point for interactions with each other and their mentors" (p. 121). That the Standards can offer teachers a common language is identified also in the evaluation research of Clinton et al. (2015).

Adoniou and Gallagher's (2017) study found that school principals saw the Standards as providing a language and 'official' framework to have conversations with

underperforming teachers about their practice and, as one principal explained: "... they help frame and articulate and give reference to expectations of teacher performance and behaviour that are always there but never articulated as well or expressed so succinctly" (p.118). Here, the Standards can be seen to have both a regulatory and a developmental function, in helping principals articulate expectations to teachers.

A potential benefit of the Standards is the promotion of, or raising the status of, the teaching profession, including increasing professional credibility (Adoniou & Gallaghers, 2017). Professional standards can also be used to help the broader community understand the teaching profession, something identified in earlier international research (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Yinger et al., 2010). This can help teaching be recognised as a profession rather than merely a practice and a "way of saying to the community we're not just pulling things out of a hat; these are things we're actually working towards and with; like the Medical Board Standards teachers have actually got standards" (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017, p.108). In this respect, professional standards can potentially play a role in raising the professional profile of teaching (Clinton et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Yinger et al., 2010). In the present climate, where a national teacher supply crisis has been announced in Australia, it is imperative to raise the status of teachers. In the Draft National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Plan) (Department for Education, 2022), one of the key action points is to "elevate the profession". Unfortunately, it could be argued that the Standards have not in the 10 or so years they have been in place elevated the profession.

Research shows support for the role the Standards can play in professional learning (PL) and growth (Adoniou and Gallagher's, 2017; Clinton et al., 2015). Newly qualified teachers in Adoniou and Gallagher's study reported that the Standards served to focus their attention on a broad range of teaching activity, encouraged them to reflect upon their practice, as well as helping them describe and monitor their growth over time. Improvements in professional learning are intended to lead to improvements in student outcomes in academic performance and enhanced wellbeing; however, research indicates that professional learning does not always result in improved outcomes for students (Gore et al., 2017). The ongoing, reflective and contextually relevant PL supported by the Standards may be more effective than more traditional models of PL such as one-off workshops, although it should be noted that there is still no consensus on the characteristics of effective professional learning (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). To summarise potential benefits, words from AITSL (2011a) are fitting: "The Standards contribute to the professionalisation of teaching and raise the status of the profession. They could also be used as the basis for a professional accountability model" (p. 9).

Potential Downsides of Professional Standards for Teachers

Although there are potential positives of professional standards for teachers, as described above, they are not supported universally and may be counterproductive in several ways. Taylor (2021) argues that professional standards for teachers can constitute a mechanism for greater supervision or surveillance through quality assurance mechanisms, working against their ability to be agentic and actively professional. In a similar view, Loughland and Ellis (2016) pointed out that "There is a strong critique of the reductionist, technical and instrumentalist impacts of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers from critical policy researchers in education" (p. 56). A disturbing aspect of the Standards was identified by Mason (2019), who described the Standards as focusing upon measurement and therefore enacting a neoliberal "system of performance, a kind of ritualized theater and that performative behaviour is easy to standardize and measure in market terms" (p. 67). This

audit culture of teacher performativity and accountability has the potential to reduce professional autonomy and teacher professionalism (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011). Likewise, Gannon (2012) noted that such evaluative measures are levied to discipline teachers and direct their practices, and also change the relationship between schools and the community.

It has been suggested that driving these measures is a mistrust of teachers' professionalism and their ability to make decisions about their practice (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012). It has long been claimed that keeping professionals under control through a "ritual of verification" and self-monitoring of one's performance does not in reality lead to a sense of ethical responsibility (Power, 1999, p. 123). As governments turn to "steering not rowing" education through various policies (Gamble, 2009, p. 83), prescriptive standards are put into place to ostensibly ensure quality. Gibbon and Henriksen (2012) have termed this "governing through standards" (p. 275).

Eaude (2014) states that "as standards are anchored in the time they were written, they come with inherent problems" (p. 94) as they reflect the ideas and knowledge of that time and may not always change with the times. Darling-Hammond (1999) warned: "Standard setting in 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" (p. 39). It has also been suggested that teachers may focus on administrative work to demonstrate that they are meeting standards at the expense of creative and responsive lesson planning (Bourke et al., 2013). Some researchers go so far as to identify standards as a means to homogenising an essentially idiosyncratic and nuanced craft (Mayer et al., 2008).

In a similar vein, Clarke and Moore (2013) assert that Standard Two in the Standards, "Know the content and how to teach it," simply states the obvious and cannot hope to capture "the idiosyncratic and contingent in teaching and learning" (p. 489). Others identify that teacher standards cannot effectively describe all that teachers do or how they respond to the contexts within which they work (Berliner & Glass, 2004; Eaude, 2014; Moore & Atkinson, 1998). Moore and Atkinson (1998) state that teaching does not happen in a vacuum but in the "economic, social and cultural milieu that schools represent" (p. 44). They suggest that judging a teacher by standards has the potential to blame the teacher "for failings that lie elsewhere" (p. 181).

Loughland and Ellis' (2016) investigation shows that the Standards neglect the affective aspects of teaching, possibly because a regulatory function necessitates standards that are measurable. Aspects of teaching that are not so overt are not well captured in the Standards, "in particular the affective dimensions that mobilise and animate teaching and learning" (Gannon, 2012, p. 59). Additionally, with reference to the Framework of Professional Teaching Standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005), prior to the national standards, O'Connor (2008) states that "it is apparent that the current professional teaching standards overlook the role that caring and personal values play in teacher's work" (p. 119). The research of Adoniou and Gallagher (2017) supports these assertions. Participants reported that there is an indefinable 'essence' about good teachers. The graduate teachers in this study noted a number of missing attributes in the Standards, including patience, open mindedness, consistency, being non-judgmental, going with the flow, and "a passion for teaching, authenticity in the want and the love for it" (p. 113). The principals in this study also reported that the Standards omitted 'intangibles' including resilience, empathy, passion, vocation, toughness, flexibility, generosity of spirit, and emotional intelligence. Additionally, Taylor (2016) found that the "ontological dimension of teachers, the human element which is at the heart of being a good teacher" (p. 174) to be missing. In short, professional standards for teachers such as those implemented in England and Australia may be seen as over

focusing on technical competencies of teachers, paying insufficient attention to the affective domain (Clarke & Moore, 2013; Ryan et al., 2013).

As Salton et al. (2022) explain, teachers' work involves complex emotional, social and cultural work with their students, within and outside classrooms and the reality that the affective domain is difficult to quantify is no justification for ignoring it (Moore & Atkinson 2018). However, Salton et al. (2022) assert that the professional standards "serve as a neat frame of reference for policymakers, education leaders and commentators to make claims regarding 'quality teachers', which fit particular sets of knowledges and conceptions of learning and teaching" (p. 60). However, Salton et al. (2022) identified that teachers can respond in unintended ways to professional standards, such as "resistance, compliance, subversion, adaption or cynicism" (p. 54). Taylor (2021) has gone so far as to say: "Perhaps what is most remarkable in this evolution of the profession in Australia is, firstly, how seduced the profession is by the Standards and secondly, how little use is made of them at the higher levels. Even though voluntary certification at the Standards' voluntary levels has been available for nearly a decade, less than half of one per cent of Australian teachers have been certified" (p. 1).

Research Design

The aim of this qualitative study was to understand the perspectives of primary school teachers who were at the Proficient career stage of the APST (the Standards). Because teacher perspectives within their own complex settings were of interest, an interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on how people make sense of their worlds, underpinned the study. According to O'Donoghue (2019), researchers working in an interpretivist paradigm use their "skills as a social being to try to understand how others understand their world" (p. 10). This was done through the use of semi-structured interviews.

The central guiding research question was: "What are the perspectives of Proficient career stage primary school teachers on the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching?" The focus was on the Standards overall and the participants were not directed to focus on only the Standards that describe teachers at a Proficient level.

Four guiding questions were used:

1. What are the **intentions** of Proficient primary school teachers with regard to implementation of the APST, and what reasons do they give for this?
2. What **strategies** do Proficient primary school teachers say they use with regard to the implementation of the APST, and what reasons do they give for this?
3. What **significance** do Proficient primary school teachers attach to having these intentions and strategies and what reasons do they give for this?
4. What **outcomes** do Proficient primary school teachers state will eventuate from having these intentions, strategies and significance, and what reasons do they give for this?

Participants

This study utilised purposive sampling, which involves drawing from a specific population in a deliberate and targeted manner (O'Donoghue, 2007). Proficient primary school teachers from five Independent schools (K-12) within the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia participated. In Australia, a Proficient teacher is a teacher who has met the

requirements for full registration through demonstrating achievement of the seven Standards at this level (AITSL, 2017).

Schools were located in a range of socioeconomic suburbs from high, middle to low-income areas, which was also reflected in fee structures. Demographic variation of the schools included differences in their expression of their faith, culture, coeducational and single gender schools. Participants varied in terms of age, gender, and number of years of teaching experience (with a minimum two years). Three teachers participated from each of five schools, totalling 15 teachers (Table 1). The Proficient career stage teacher was targeted as teachers at this career stage would have considerable experience with the Standards and experience in the changing landscape of education in Australia. Some of these changes include the introduction of the National Curriculum, National Quality Standard, and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. Participants were full-time practising teachers of Foundation to Year 6 (5 to 12 year-olds).

School Type	Teachers		
Coeducational School: 1	Teacher 1 (T1)	Teacher 2 (T2)	Teacher 3 (T3)
Coeducational School: 2	Teacher 4 (T4)	Teacher 5 (T5)	Teacher 6 (T6)
Coeducational School: 3	Teacher 7 (T7)	Teacher 8 (T8)	Teacher 9 (T9)
Girls School: 4	Teacher 10 (T10)	Teacher 11 (T11)	Teacher 12 (T12)
Boys School: 5	Teacher 13 (T13)	Teacher 14 (T14)	Teacher 15 (T15)

Table: School Type and Participants

Data Collection

The most appropriate method of data collection was the semi-structured interview, which is in line with an interpretivist approach. As noted by Fontana and Frey (2000, “interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between (two) or more people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (p. 646). The interviews, of 45-60 minutes in duration, were conducted with each individual participant at a time and place suitable to them at their school. All interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed. Although an aide memoire was used, the interviews were conversational in nature and were conducted face to face. Examples of questions asked were “What are your thoughts and feelings about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, or ‘the Standards’? What do you think of the layout and language used in the Standards document or website? If you could change or add anything about the contents of the Standards, what would you change, and why?”

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data collection. Principles from grounded theory guided the analysis, where the aim was to develop “concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, pp. 7-8). Inductive data analysis entailed open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the open coding phase, interview transcripts were coded line-by-line and occasionally word-by-word. As similar concepts were identified, the researcher continued to code and categorise. During this phase, the question was asked: “What category or property of a category does this incident

indicate?” (Glaser, 1992, p. 39). Constant comparison took place to refine the initial codes and develop categories. Where open coding was conducted to segment data in order to analyse theoretical possibilities, assumptions and categories, axial coding was conducted to put categories together and generate themes. This phase identified interrelationships between the categories developed during open coding (Punch, 2009). Memos (Glaser & Strauss (2017), or detailed notes of ideas and thoughts about the meaning of the data and the coded categories, were used to support the analytic process.

Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was assured by means such as of member checking, thick description, outlining the researcher’s positionality, and careful documentation of audit trails. The main researcher was a Primary School Principal at the time of the study and it is acknowledged that their perspectives may have influenced the interpretations made in this study, although attempts were made to put any personal views aside in the analysis of the data. Ethics permission was secured from The University of Western Australia and all participants were given information sheets and participant consent forms to sign.

Results

The results of the study are presented according to the two overarching categories, namely the Strengths and Challenges associated with the Standards. Within these two categories are five themes and 15 sub-themes (Table 2), which are discussed and evidenced below. The number of references, to indicate the prominence of the subthemes, is provided.

Strengths			
1. The Standards support professional practice			
Subthemes	Participants	Number of references	
1.1 The Standards support good practice	15	94	
1.2 The Standards encourage reflective practice	13	39	
1.3 Leadership that supports professional practice	13	26	
1.4 The Standards encourage and support differentiated teaching.	8	11	
2. The Standards support professional career development			
Subthemes			
2.1 The Standards support career progression	13	49	
2.2 The Standards can be used as an appraisal tool	10	21	
2.3 The Standards support professional portfolio evidence	9	20	
2.4 The Standards encourage professional accountability	7	15	
3. The Standards document is user-friendly			
Subthemes			

3.1	The Standards document is user friendly with clear vocabulary	14	25
Challenges			
4. The Standards present challenges to professional practice			
Subthemes			
4.1	The Standards lack significance to teaching practice	10	40
4.2	The Standards do not consider teachers' limited time	9	25
4.3	The Standards disregard current teaching practice	4	7
4.4	The Standards do not consider the personal attributes of a teacher	3	12
5. The Standards have challenges in their presentation			
Subthemes			
5.1	The vocabulary/terminology in the Standards is repetitive and unclear	11	28
5.2	The Standards lack consistent levels of detail	5	16

Table 2: Themes and subthemes

Strengths of the Standards

The participants thought that the Standards supported teacher professional practice. The first subtheme “The Standards support good practice” is based on multiple comments in the dataset in that all 15 participants made 94 comments regarding the notion of the Standards being relevant, positive, a helpful tool in teaching and a benchmark of good practice. One of the participants affirmed the Standards by referring to the research underpinning them: “I see those as being sound in practice. They've put quite a bit of research into what they want each standard to be. Yes, you can see how the theory and practice interlink.” (T8)

The second subtheme identified in the Strengths category was “The Standards Encourage Reflective Practice.” All participants regarded the Standards as a helpful reflection tool benefitting teacher practice. One teacher stated:

I think they (APST) have the potential to help in that it actually forces you to think about your practice as an educator, and I think it makes you really reflect, and I tend to be fairly self-reflective... for me personally, it was quite a big part of the reflection process and then realising what I needed to do to reflect that understanding as well. ... the process of doing the portfolio that made me more reflective of my own practice. (T1)

The third subtheme under the theme “The Standards support Professional Practice” is “Leadership that supports professional practice”. According to the participants, having clearly defined expectations written in an explicit manner in the Standards supported school leaders in managing performance and having more objective professional conversations around growth and development. Participants indicated that in their experience, school leaders used the Standards as performance management tool, and a tool for standardising a whole school approach to good practice. The Standards underpinned part of the development of a professional community, as stated by Teacher 8:

We use it across the school. Our AITSL Standards form part of our pillars of practice. They refer to leadership, they refer to engagement with parents and the

community, they refer to your teaching practice, and they refer to your professional practices. Our pillars, based on our statement of school: faith, and care and love, that is coupled with the pillars, and the pillars are inclusive of the AITSL Standards. (T8)

The final subtheme is “The Standards encourage and support differentiated teaching”. Teachers noted the importance of using differentiated teaching practices to effectively meet the needs of students, and that the Standards explicitly require differentiation. This was indicated by participant comments:

As you would expect, there's ... , a big focus on differentiation. And knowing your students and teaching to that individual student.... You teach to the curriculum. But if your children aren't meeting that curriculum, then you don't continue to focus on that, you focus on where they are. (T10)

You're always going back and making sure that you're fully able to plan and develop your own planning, ... to make sure that you're addressing all the needs of the students within your class. So, are you making sure that you're differentiating your work, so all children are accessing it, whether it be for your gifted and talented, or those that receive support. (T11)

The second theme that was identified under the category Strength was, “The Standards support Professional Career Development”, with four subthemes: “The Standards support career progression”, “The Standards can be used as an appraisal tool”, “The Standards support professional portfolio evidence” and, “The Standards encourage professional accountability”. Teachers noted that the Standards reflect the requirements for career Progression by providing a mapping tool for career goal setting, through Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher stages:

You can chart where you are, whether you're proficient or highly accomplished, and then looking into being a lead teacher and to be the best version I can be of myself. I think just in looking at how I can progress as a teacher. (T10)

Additionally, Standards were perceived as a supportive tool for use in the school appraisal process. One teacher said:

...we get observed for our yearly review...the deputies in the prep school review us against that (APST). You prove how you're meeting the Standards, how you're meeting the Standards of the school and then they would go to the head teacher of the prep school and the deputy head. And your line managers check that they agree with you. (T14)

Similarly, the Standards were viewed as supporting the gathering of appropriate evidence for the professional portfolio required for teacher registration. One teacher said:

It helped you put together your portfolio and it taught you all about the Standards and the kind of evidence you needed, and they provided us with a lot of documentation, almost pulling apart the Standards. And gave examples of what sort of documentation could be used to support that. And that was really beneficial... (T1)

In the final subtheme, teachers reported that they felt that the Standards could help them demonstrate professional accountability: “They do keep you accountable because I would look at that and think, I don't actually, I don't think I've actually done that” (T6), and, “I think even in terms of not wanting to progress my career as a teacher, and just for my own sake of accountability, I want to always be doing better.” (T10)

The final theme under Strengths was, “The Standards document is user friendly with clear vocabulary”. Several teachers mentioned that the formatting and terminology used in the Standards were clear and easy to understand and the linear layout makes it a readable document, with the key elements for various career stages being presented clearly. One

teacher stated that: “The actual layout, it's kind of a good system in terms of how um, the information goes through,” (T4) and another said, “I think it's... I think its fine. The language is fine. I understand the language. I like how it's set out. Um, you go on from the basics and then if you need to, you can go further. So, I think it is easily laid out.” (T6)

Challenges of the Standards

This section presents perspectives of participating teachers who reported experiencing challenges with the Standards. The most prominent theme under the Challenges category (Table 2) was: “The Standards can present challenges to professional practice”. Four subthemes were identified, namely: “The Standards lack significance to teaching practice”, “The Standards do not consider the teacher’s limited time”, “The Standards disregard current teaching practice” and “The Standards do not consider the personal attributes of a teacher”. The second theme related to issues with the presentation of the Standards. Here, two subthemes were identified: “The vocabulary/terminology in the Standards is repetitive and unclear” and “The Standards lack consistent levels of detail”. The most prominent theme relating to challenges with the Standards was around professional practice. These challenges appeared to have a negative effect on teachers’ engagement with the Standards. The first subtheme to emerge was that the Standards lack significance to teaching practice, with teachers stating: “I don’t think they have helped me improve” (T5); “I don’t think they are having any impact at all” (T2); “I don’t feel like they’ve had a huge impact on the quality of education that, or the quality of experience I’ve provided the students that I’ve taught” (T3); “I don’t think they should be used. I wouldn’t be using these to be measuring people. I wouldn’t be using that no. No way, no” (T13).

Some teachers identified a disparity between the ideal and the real world, with the Standards not necessarily acknowledging their real teaching contexts, which were busy with competing demands. The omission of the social and emotional characteristics of good teachers from the Standards was also noted as contributing to a lack of significance of the Standards. One participant explained differing priorities as: “There's so many other things that we're doing. So many other school initiatives, or things that you and your partner teacher are doing at that time, or focusing on the children, or new programs being introduced, or a new whatever, that it [Standards] just falls by the wayside” (T3), as well as, “I don’t, to be honest with you, but I also feel like in.... in my everyday life as a teacher, it’s not something that I look to first port of call, you know, consult regularly, or anything like that” (T3).

As already mentioned, some teachers placed minimal significance on the Standards, which appeared to be associated with a reluctance to engage with them in a meaningful way. To summarise, some teachers stated that they did not view the Standards as an important aspect of their teaching practice because they had numerous other pressures and priorities to address. Standards were essentially seen as another hoop to jump through, reflecting a disparity between an ideal and real world of teaching.

The second challenge, related to the above, was that the Standards do not consider teachers’ limited time in daily practice and are thus difficult to implement. Teachers made many comments that the Standards do not consider the limited time teachers have, due to high workload and multiple responsibilities. This lack of time to engage and reflect appeared to be quite a serious problem, with one teacher stating: “Not enough time to reflect on them. Most schools find the day to day it's just so busy. ... I think I'm busy enough right now” (T1). Restrictions on time undoubtedly impact teachers in their practice. Another teacher said:

In an ideal world, it would be lovely, but I don't have the time to do that. It sounds great and it would be nice if you could have a focused one for you and your team teacher for the fortnight and then go back. That's great, but in the real world I don't. I've got no time. I think if and when you're given explicit time to do so, in a staff meeting, I think they're very helpful. (T3)

A number of teachers commented that the standards did not reflect contemporary teaching practice, as described in subtheme 1.3 (Table 2). One teacher explicitly stated that the Standards need to be updated: “Yes, my thoughts have changed. I think they could update the standards.... the research was done across 6,000 teachers and sample group was 119 and as a profession, we have grown in Australia” (T8). Further to this point was that graduate teachers had greater knowledge and proficiency with ICT than when the Standards were written:

Their views on, for example, professional knowledge and professional practice, are far more ICT-based, than ours ever were. It's a rapid changing teaching world where, the standards do they actually reflect the fact that information is now passed between home and school within a 24-hour period” (T8). “Yes, it's a different approach. Utilising technology, and actually enhancing the actual information out there” (T8).

Another teacher wondered whether more emphasis on students rather than teachers may be advantageous:

I wonder if they could be more about the student-focused things, rather than only what you're doing, and what you should and shouldn't be thinking. I know they're obviously made to improve the outcome for the students. (T3)

The fourth subtheme was “the Standards do not consider the personal attributes of a teacher”. The omission of the relational and emotional maturity and emotional intelligence required in teaching was commented on by teachers:

There are so many areas that make up a good teacher as I say a good sense of humour, relationship, and emotional intelligence, and being able to relate to the kids well. Can you find that in any documents? I don't think that it catches what a great teacher can do. (T13)

The same participant noted that being a good teacher is not only having all the Standards ticked off, “but having good communication or the great skills, I suppose with the students and with colleagues” (T13). Another teacher said that there was “no recognition, or label, of 'you're fabulous', there's no ... nothing to be gained for them, that makes it a little bit ineffectual” (T2).

In summary, participating teachers thought that the personal attributes of emotional and relational intelligence, empathy, and high moral purpose are critical for an effective teacher. As indicated above, a teacher can tick all the boxes relating to professional knowledge, practice and engagement, yet not possess the human characteristics needed in the teaching profession. According to participants, the omission of these elements positions the Standards as a somewhat clinical, codified document, devoid of the personal and relational attributes that acknowledge teachers as individual human beings, who “all bring something different and that's what I like. I think that's fantastic. But everyone brings something different” (T13).

The second and final theme under Challenges was “The Standards have issues with their presentation”. (This is in contrast to subtheme 3.1, where other participants saw the Standards document as user friendly). Teachers articulated that they perceived the vocabulary and terminology as repetitive: “Lots repeated, and covered more than once, it just keeps coming up, kept repeating ... a lot of crossover” (T1). Another teacher stated: “The only thing I will say, and I'm just going to flick through it, some sound very similar to others. A bit

repetitious? Repetition, absolutely” (T10). Yet another said: “So, when I'm typing, I'm like, "Oh that could fit into that area, and it could fit into that." So, I suppose it could double up or an overlay and it's quite large." (T15)

A participating teacher stated that the terminology used in the Standards was: “a little bit ambiguous sometimes, in the wording of it as well. In which case, can we have a better way of phrasing and combining them together?” (T1). Other participants commented on a lack of clarity in the language: “So, in terms of the language, you would be mistaken, and even as a teacher you could sometimes be mistaken for thinking, "Well, that pretty much sounds like that standard" (T10). One participant described the Standards as being full of jargon:

So no, I'm probably rather disappointed in them and I think it just looks like bureaucratic jargon that whereas it just depends on interpretation, and it would be disappointing because some great teachers would be just put down as like a graduate or a proficient standard. It's full of jargon. (T13)

Participants commented that the level of detail in the Standards was problematic because the detail was seen as either excessive or, in some cases, too limited:

When I first saw them, I was quite overwhelmed. The first year I found out about them I was really quite overwhelmed. It was still quite a task to put this portfolio together, especially my second year of teaching. It was quite stressful. (T3)

Other teachers said: “I mean there's quite a lot there ... it's pretty detailed. Maybe just make it less.” (T14), and “It is wordy. And there's lots and lots of focus areas within each standard as well. It's a bit too much?” (T12). On the other hand, one participant remarked concerning a lack of detail:

I'm not sure that it delineates well enough between the four stages to say who's doing their job incredibly well as to who is just doing their job. I think it doesn't give enough for the teachers to hang onto. (T2)

Discussion and conclusion

The Standards (APST) were seen by participating teachers as having a number of strengths that can be helpful in improving and monitoring teaching practice. Positive themes of the Standards supporting professional practice and career development, and as a user-friendly document, were identified in this study. However, it was also found that the Standards can present challenges to teacher practice and that the presentation of the standards can be challenging.

That the Standards supports good practice which, in turn, can assist in raising and shaping the professional status of teachers was the most prominent subtheme of this research. In this respect, many teachers reported that their practice was positively influenced by the standards. These views are consistent with Bourke et al., (2013), who identified that teacher professionalism is increasingly seen in terms of teacher quality, which is in turn framed by professional standards. Additionally, participants observed that the routines, processes and practices of their schools meaningfully incorporated the Standards, which guided and provided a focus for professional learning. This is somewhat contrary to concerns raised in the research of Buchanan (2012) and Tuinamuana (2011), that teacher professional standards can result in decontextualised and individualistic approaches to teaching.

The second most prominent subtheme was that the Standards provide a reflective tool, which can serve to shape and support teacher practice. For teachers, reflection and the identification of areas that might improve their teaching practice and help them make progress towards the next career stage, was seen to be supported by the continuum format of

the Standards document. Participants identified that the Standard descriptors can provide an outline of what is required if they are aiming for success at the next level. Consistent with the research of Nolan (2011), teachers in this study were often able to recollect and evaluate experiences through reflection and self-assessment processes supported by the Standards. As noted, some participants explained that the Standards can provide a positive support for career progression. This is somewhat contrary to research by Gannon (2012) that the Standards are positioned as representing a ‘deficit’ model of career progression, enacted through incremental stages, where teachers need to be modified or corrected through increased regulation and monitoring.

Participants also identified that by making clear expectations for teachers, that the Standards can support teacher professionalism. Teacher standards can provide a benchmark for teaching quality and the evaluation of teaching/teaching quality (Buchanan, 2017; Torrance & Forde, 2017). This view was reflected in the responses of some participants. In this respect, participants indicated that the Standards facilitated or enabled an objective judgment about aspects of teacher/teaching quality such as performance reviews, reflection, promotion processes, recruitment and under-performance.

Despite the view that the Standards can play a role in promoting teacher quality, participants identified that a lack of time in which to utilise the Standards effectively was a key challenge. That teachers have limited time to engage with teacher standards has been explored by Bourke et al. (2013), who identified that administrative workloads expected of teachers and school leaders can be increased by regulatory processes associated with standards and certification. Workloads and time pressures have been identified as a significant challenge for Australian teachers and school leaders by Gonski et al. (2018) as well as in current debates about how to attract and retain teachers (Department for Education, 2022). Of particular concern was the view of participants that the process of gathering evidence to satisfy registration and certification obligations took time away from their core business of teaching.

School leadership was identified by participants as playing an important role in positively supporting the standards within their schools. This positive support by school leaders indicates leadership approaches that align with the Australian Professional Standards for Principals (AITSL, 2014), in that they are collaborative, relational and respectful in their interactions with teachers. On the other hand, authoritarian approaches such as those described by Leonard (2012), have the potential to restrict any positive effects of teacher standards, and heavy handed regulatory responses implemented by school leaders can unintentionally de-professionalise teachers. Furthermore, top-down or authoritarian approaches can lead to teachers “playing the game” (Tuinamuna, 2011, p.78) or acting subversively, discretely sabotaging leadership initiatives and directives. That teachers did not experience authoritarian or top down leadership approaches may be an effect of changes in school leadership approaches in the last decade.

Participants stated consistently that the Standards do not sufficiently consider the human qualities of successful teachers. Their views were consistent with findings of Monteiro (2015) that the focus of teaching standards is upon the aspects which can be effectively measured. As such, that which be measured, excluding the human person and therefore the ontological dimension of teaching, tended to be prioritised by the Standards. Whilst ontological aspects of teaching are difficult to measure, the absence of the human qualities of teachers in professional standards is consistent with an emphasis on technical abilities which can typify a neoliberal educational society. Disregarding or failing to acknowledge human qualities which teachers may view to be central to their work imposes limits upon who they can *be* as teachers and can contribute to a sense of powerlessness. The Standards do not consider or articulate the personhood of an effective teacher, which can be

explained in terms of unique personal attributes such as a capacity for caring, emotional intelligence, relationality and persistence. In this respect, the perspectives of participants in this study, are consistent with the work of Taylor (2016) in seeing that teaching is a social and relational practice. Within a context of teacher attrition and high levels of teacher burnout in Australia, the Standards may unintentionally be ‘making invisible’ the human qualities of teachers such as resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016), compassion and collegiality, which may help teachers withstand the pressures of teaching. This is an important finding of this research that warrants further investigation.

Overall, results from this study indicate that whilst the Standards are in principle valued by many teachers at the Proficient level, who find them useful for professional learning and career development when applied within a collegial and supportive school context, there may be a need for a review of the content of the Standards with a view to including social and relational attributes of teachers. It also needs to be acknowledged that teachers are often time poor and, in many cases, cannot meaningfully engage with the Standards due to a range of competing demands on their time and energy. Since teachers are generally time-poor with a heavy workload, it is possible that more time should be allocated for them to engage meaningfully with the Standards. Furthermore, the relevance of the Standards and the language used in the Standards is not clear to some teachers – this could be attributed to the ways in which the Standards are explained, used and supported within different school contexts. The Standards appear to be a double-edged sword, with the capacity to be helpful to the teaching profession if they are used as a tool to guide and support teachers; however, there is a danger of the Standards being used in a perfunctory manner if teachers do not have time to engage with them meaningfully and do not believe that they encompass all important aspects of contemporary teacher practice.

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