

## Meaningful Application of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: The Role of the University Appointed Supervisor

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*Abstract: Preservice teachers undertake mandatory professional experience as part of their journey towards classroom readiness and in-service teaching. Supporting them in this process are supervisors who both guide and assess these novices. Central to this assessment are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which need to be rigorously applied to ensure quality teaching graduates. This article investigates the application of these Standards by the supervisors in both their formative and summative assessment. Data are derived from interviews with final year preservice teachers and supervisors in a primary teaching degree course at one Western Australian university. Findings suggest that there is scope for a more detailed and consistent application of the Standards. The paper argues for the development of a model of supervision to ensure consistent evaluations against the Standards, as recommended by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group.*

### Introduction

This article focuses on the application of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) in the assessment of preservice teachers on professional experience and is situated in a larger project investigating the contribution of the University Appointed Supervisor to preservice teacher learning. The analysis of the data for the entire project revealed the need to focus attention on the specific application of these Standards, which are mandated by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). The aim of this research is to better understand the application of the APST in this assessment by the University Appointed Supervisors which occurs, in part, while preservice teachers are on professional experience.

This study investigates the use of the APST by the University Appointed Supervisor, herein called the supervisor, who supports and assesses preservice teachers on professional experience. There has been little research conducted into the contribution of the supervisor to preservice learning (Deutschman et al., 2022; Vaughan, 2014), yet it is critical to understand the impact that supervision has on preservice teachers' paths to classroom readiness (Burns & Badiali, 2015).

This qualitative research presents the findings from interviews conducted with preservice teachers and supervisors, specifically analysing data relevant to the APST. Within the context of this study, the professional experience assessment is undertaken by supervisors employed by one Western Australian university. Interviews were conducted with these participants, as well as preservice teachers, and investigated the application of the Standards during professional experiences. The data suggests that there is scope for a broader application of the Standards by the supervisors in all discussions with their students.

## Context

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Australia is currently situated in a neoliberal environment which is occurring globally (Ball, 2016). This sees ever-tightening budgetary constraints under which ITE providers must operate (Burns et al., 2016). This political milieu also sees an ‘evidence-based best practice paradigm’ with focus on standardised testing and ‘indirect surveillance’ (Connell, 2013; Patrick, 2013). Griffiths et al. (2021) observe that the Australian Government’s sustained focus on its education system is, in part, a result of Australia’s declining performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment rankings, undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016; 2019). This emphasis on education led the federal government to establish AITSL in 2010. This organisation was purposed to provide leadership and build a shared vision of quality education, establishing the APST (AITSL, 2011), against which all teachers, including preservice teachers, are assessed.

The APST have been developed by AITSL to address the quality of teaching in Australia, and the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG] report (2014) reiterated the importance of them. However, the report noted concerns over their application throughout teacher education courses, suggesting inadequate application of the Standards in preservice teacher assessment. The application of the APST plays a critical role for preservice teachers during their professional experience. This aspect of the learning of these aspirant teachers is cited by most graduates as the most valuable contributor to their readiness for the classroom (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Mayer et al., 2014). It is during these professional experiences that preservice teachers indicate the greatest use of the APST in their courses (Call et al., 2021). Given the pivotal importance of the APST in the assessment of preservice teachers, research is essential to investigate how they are applied in this assessment.

## Standards

Established standards provide indicators for determinations about the readiness of graduating preservice teachers for the classroom, and are designed to provide challenging benchmarks (Brooks, 2021; Swabey et al., 2010). They offer a common foundation, that is, a common language and set of norms and expectations that allow both formative and summative assessment of preservice teachers (Mockler, 2020; Sim et al., 2013). Mockler observes that professional standards for teachers are a key aspect of the global education reform movement and have restructured different aspects of teachers’ work over the past two decades. In Australia, the APST are a “public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students” (AITSL, 2011, p. 3). There are, however, critics of teaching performance standards who suggest that teaching can be impacted negatively by focus on the technical aspects, and oversimplification (Loughland & Ellis, 2016).

The APST comprise seven Standards encompassing knowing children and how they learn (1); knowing content and how to teach it (2); planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning (3); creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments (4); assessing, providing feedback and reporting on student learning (5); engaging in professional learning (6); and engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community (7) (AITSL, 2011). Each of the APST must be met to Graduate level for a preservice teacher to be considered *Classroom Ready* (TEMAG, 2014).

*Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (TEMAG, 2014) is the result of a major review of Initial Teacher Education in Australia and is currently guiding major reforms in teacher education. One of the key findings of this report was the insufficient application of the APST, noting that ITE providers were neither adequately rigorous nor consistent in their assessment of the classroom readiness of preservice teachers against the APST. TEMAG Recommendation 25 states that “higher education providers assess all preservice teachers against the Graduate level of the Professional Standards” (TEMAG, 2014, p.33). Given the importance of this assessment against the APST, it becomes crucial to ensure that this evaluation is undertaken meaningfully with the aim of improving rigour and consistency.

As standards are agreed as an indicator of quality teaching, it is important that they are applied meaningfully. Meaningfulness is defined as full of purpose, significance or value (Dictionary.com, n.d.). When considering the meaningful application of standards in assessment, this definition provides a useful framework. In discussing a standards-based paradigm for grading in North American classrooms, Vatterott (2015) describes the need for students to synthesise and analyse what they are learning, being able to demonstrate what they can do with what they have learned, rather than simply demonstrate what they know. This definition expands on the notion of purpose and value and provides a valuable example of how preservice teachers can meaningfully evince the application of their learning to their assessors during professional experience.

### **Professional Experience Assessment**

Seeking evidence of preservice teacher learning are the university-based educators, the classroom-based mentor teachers and the supervisors who assess and support preservice teachers. The university-based educators prepare the preservice teachers for professional experience, and also prepare the assessment documents against which the mentor teachers and supervisors evaluate them. These documents must be sufficiently detailed to ensure robust evidence (TEMAG, 2014). These various contributors to preservice teacher assessment require a shared understanding of the indicators of achievement. However, this common perception of what constitutes evidence can be difficult to agree with, even with the provision of clear indicators (Sim et al., 2013). Sim et al. explain that reasons for this can include mentor teachers’ perceptions of their role, their expectations of the learning stage of the preservice teacher, and the supervisors’ interpretations of the criteria. These factors can lead to disagreements between assessors which can challenge preservice teachers who are trying to evince the integration of their university learning into the classroom, to their assessors. Supervisors, as representatives of, and trained by the university, should be positioned to communicate the expectations of assessment of the ITE program to school staff and contribute effectively to this shared understanding (Cuenca, 2012).

### **University Appointed Supervisors**

Supervisors support and assess preservice teachers on professional experience, and are often retired teachers. Buchanan (2020) reported that in the United States, supervisors are often retired teachers which, anecdotally, is similar in Australia. TEMAG (2014) acknowledged the importance of supervision, observing that it provides preservice teachers with feedback and guidance from practiced educators. Burns et al. (2020) recognised that professional experiences are critical for teacher preparation, but noted that limited conceptual frameworks existed for preservice teacher supervision. To address this, they

conducted a metasynthesis of the literature to develop a framework of the activities of this important role. This metasynthesis offered a comprehensive view of supervision practice, yet did not present the voice of principal stakeholders, the preservice teachers and supervisors.

Supervision is accepted as a complex task (Burns & Badiali, 2015). The 84 pedagogical routines of supervision identified in Burns et al.'s (2020) framework are evidence of this. The role requires providing support, guidance, and assessment within a triadic relationship among supervisors, mentor teachers and preservice teachers (Buchanan, 2020; Deutschman et al. 2022).

While supervision designs vary internationally, many include a requirement to support and mentor the preservice teachers, as well as provide summative assessment (Griffiths et al., 2021). These conflated roles are dichotomous and should possibly be enacted separately, rather than the supervisor being both supporter and assessor (Burns et al., 2016). This contradiction between supervisor as mentor and supervisor as evaluator, performing both educative and evaluative functions, is acknowledged in the literature, with suggestion that the roles be clearly defined (Palmeri & Peter, 2019; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016).

There is a further complication in that supervisors, while experienced practitioners with expertise in teaching school students, are disconnected from the university education program (Buchanan, 2020). They are not typically versed in the expertise held by the university teacher educators, being a knowledge of how one learns to teach (Palmeri & Peter, 2019). Nonetheless, they are considered to be in a unique position to bridge the gap between the theory learned at university with the practice of the classroom (Cuenca, 2010; Deutschman et al., 2022). However, training supervisors to be sufficiently skilled in the knowledge of how one learns to teach may be costly for the ITE providers who are operating under budgetary constraints (Burns et al., 2016).

## Research Questions

The research questions for the broader project to which this paper contributes are seeking to identify the contribution of the supervisors to preservice teacher learning. With significant data collected from 28 interviews, this paper is focused solely on the application of the APST as directed by AITSL. The research questions relevant to this paper are:

1. From the perspective of preservice teachers, in what respect are the APST being applied in the assessment of their classroom readiness?
2. From the perspective of university appointed supervisors, in what respect are the APST being applied in their assessment of preservice teachers' classroom readiness?

## Methodology

This study was conducted with a social constructivist lens, intending to explore the complexity of the perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Central to this project is the notion that social constructivists see the significance of both the context in which the learning happens and the social context that the learners bring to their learning milieu (Kim, 2001). Coupled with this underpinning lens of social constructivism, the APST (AITSL, 2011) provide the framework for all discussions, as preservice teachers learn from their professional experience within the framework of these Standards, mandated by AITSL.

Supporting this social constructivist paradigm underpinning this research, a qualitative method was adopted to enable an in-depth examination of the central topics

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Vishnevsky and Beanlands (2004) observe that qualitative research approaches truth as a subjective reality encompassing each individual's experience and allowing the investigator to explore those individuals' experiences. To enable this exploration, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the major stakeholders in the preservice teacher learning through supervision, being the preservice teachers and the supervisors.

## Participants

Participants were purposively selected to provide the data required for this investigation to best assist the researchers to answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2012). The participants were all associated with one university in Western Australia. This university was selected as it is one of the largest teacher education schools in Australia and because it consistently receives high evaluations for teaching and learning. Participation was on a voluntary basis and anonymity was assured with no reference to individuals included. Participants included supervisors (n=13) and preservice teachers (n=15).

### Preservice Teachers

All preservice teacher participants were in their final year of a four-year primary undergraduate course, in 2019 or 2020. Final year students were selected as they had previously completed four other professional experiences, so had a depth of experience in being supervised. Further, following the successful completion of their final professional experience, they are deemed to be *Classroom Ready* (TEMAG, 2014), that is, ready to assume all the duties of an in-service classroom teacher.

The primary program was selected as the focus for this research to elicit a deeper understanding of one discipline. While similarities in supervision exist across the early childhood, primary and secondary programs, each has discipline nuances which could have diluted the depth of understanding that could result from emphasis in one area. For instance, secondary students have subject specialisations which may not be the specific subject of their supervisor's experience. The researchers considered that such nuances could detract from the focus of identifying the broad contribution of supervisors to preservice teacher classroom readiness. From greater than 300 students, 15 participants were recruited, with both male (n=3) and female (n=12) participants. This ratio is consistent with ratio of females to males in teaching, being 71.7% in 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The range of students who volunteered included those from each of the two metropolitan and one regional campus of the University. Participants were not asked to divulge their final professional experience grades, although several did, indicating range in the academic abilities of participating students.

Preservice teacher cohorts varied in that the professional experience for the 2020 group was shortened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was very little reference to this in the interviews with these students. Data from these interviews focused on the application of the APST by the supervisors, rather than the impact of the pandemic.

### University Appointed Supervisors

Aligned with the focus on the primary program which only included primary preservice teacher participants, the only supervisor participants invited were those from the cohort who had undertaken supervision of primary preservice teachers (n=76) in those years. Of that 76, 13 supervisors volunteered and all were interviewed. There was no direct correlation of the supervisors to the preservice teachers and there was no investigation of this as part of the interview selection process. There were both male (n=5) and female (n=8) participants with a range of supervision experience from zero to greater than five years.

### University Context

Within the context of this study, it is important to note that the dual model of supervision, with a supportive and evaluative function, is currently in use by the university in this study. They typically visit these novices for two hours approximately every two weeks, observe them teach a lesson and provide feedback and guidance as to their performance, ahead of assessing them against the APST. The supervisors are all experienced teachers who have been assessed by university-based educators as being sufficiently experienced to undertake the role. These university-based educators have oversight of the professional experience units, wherein they prepare the preservice teachers for these experiences, and provide training to the supervisors each semester to highlight assessment requirements. They also prepare comprehensive resources to facilitate the provision of feedback for, and assessment of, the preservice teachers.

The staff at the university in this study have developed two resources. The Monitoring Tool is a formative assessment tool, used to guide the progress of the preservice teacher towards a final grade, detailing what the Standards look like at each of the attainable grades for professional experience, being Graduate level, Highly Competent Graduate and Outstanding Graduate. The Final Evaluation Form is a summative assessment tool, designed for use by supervisors in the assessment of preservice teachers. It contains all of the Standards, with multiple indicators within each standard. Completion of this form is required to ensure that preservice teachers have demonstrated that they have achieved all APST to Graduate level, thus being determined *Classroom Ready*.

### Procedures and Data

Ethics for the larger project was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Approvals were provided by the Associate Dean of the Primary discipline, and Executive Dean of the School of Education to approach the primary cohorts and supervisors respectively. Participants were invited to volunteer via email and written consent was provided by volunteers. All interviews were conducted by the Chief Investigator (CI) and were initially completed face-to-face with audio recordings. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews from early 2020 were conducted online and audio recorded. All interviews were transcribed, some by the CI, and later, by an approved transcription company with a contract of confidentiality. All transcriptions were confirmed by participants as accurate records of the interviews. Coding of the data and the thematic analysis were completed using NVivo12. The data set, comprising 28 interviews, was analysed specifically with respect to the posed research questions. The interview questions for the full project addressed the importance of relationships, the provision of

feedback, the integration of theory, reflective practice and the most significant contributing factors by the supervisors. Pertinent to this section of the study were the interview questions to the preservice teachers: “What components of the APST did the supervisors assist you with in preparing for classroom readiness and how did they do this?”; and the supervisors: “Do you focus on any specific components of the APST when supervising preservice teachers? If so, why?”

## **Analysis**

The analysis process was iterative, encompassing multiple rounds of coding. Initially, all data from the interviews were analysed to find all responses relevant to the APST. Further to this, and more specifically, data from the most pertinent interview questions detailed above were analysed. Responses from both preservice teachers and supervisors were structurally coded into each of the seven Standards, including interpretation of data aligning to the appropriate Standard, regardless of whether it was named specifically. Following the initial structural coding, an inductive process of open coding was undertaken to create an inventory of themes relevant to the application of the Standards (Miles et al., 2014). Following the open coding, axial coding was undertaken to refine and categorise the themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Initial coding was undertaken by the CI, and rich and robust review discussions were held with the CI and co-investigators to cross-check codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and agree the themes.

While there are seven standards on which preservice teachers are assessed, it should be noted that in some instances on professional experience, there is little or no opportunity to demonstrate one aspect of the Standards. For instance, there may be no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in a classroom, so the preservice teacher cannot reasonably be assessed as demonstrating competence with this cohort (included in Standards 1 and 2). Further, Standards 6 and 7 (relating to professional learning and engaging with colleagues, parents/carers and the community) can present some challenges in the assessment of the preservice teacher. However, they must be checked off as having been demonstrated. Depending on year levels, there may be limited exposure to parents and caregivers, as they are typically less hands-on with their children in the upper years of primary school. Also, with only a few visits made by the supervisors over the course of a professional experience, collecting evidence of engaging in professional learning and engaging with colleagues, carers and the community can present challenges. Standards 6 and 7 are discussed in more detail in the findings.

## **Findings**

The following section reports on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the provision of feedback as it did, or did not, relate to the APST. Data were consistent across the groups, potentially due to the explicit nature of the investigation, or the related specificity of the interview questions. Therefore, these themes are presented factoring in data from both preservice teacher and supervisor responses. There were limited specific references to any given Standard and the majority of any references were cited by preservice teachers. Given the central importance of the APST in professional experience assessment, it is noteworthy that from the 28 interviews, there were not 28 responses to any one given Standard.

No specific Standard was highlighted as of markedly greater significance than others, although there were more references to Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it, and Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning. A notable exception to this relates to the aforementioned difficulty with ascertaining sufficient evidence for Standards 6 and 7 in some instances. As the CI sought to understand how this was secured in the few visits that the supervisors made during the course of the professional experiences, probing questions were asked. This focused questioning led to a greater prevalence of these standards in the data.

### Limited Reference to the APST in Supervisor Feedback

The first theme emphasised the lack of specific reference to the APST by supervisors when providing feedback. Preservice teachers are taught the APST throughout their course at university and these Standards are embedded in their evaluations. As such, they expected that their supervisors, as those tasked with supporting and assessing their performance, would be similarly acquainted with them. However, this quote from Preservice Teacher 5 indicated that this was not necessarily occurring, *“To be honest, none of my supervisors I don't think ever made specific reference and feedback, things like that, like specific reference to the AITSL Standards. So there was no using any of that language”*. The two following quotes indicate the importance that the preservice teachers placed on the Standards and their explicit application.

*I was actually going to say to you that they should have a bigger role to play in the AITSL Standards and guidance for it...I was really thinking that more support is needed for the AITSL Standards because you know them but it's how to put them into practice. (Preservice Teacher 6)*

*I think they talk about it a lot at uni, but there's not really a connection, especially with my supervisors, no connection between the AITSL Standards and that explicitly. Obviously it's in our assessment, but they didn't speak like that. (Preservice Teacher 5)*

Typically, reference to any specific Standard was made by the preservice teachers. Evidence includes, *“And so I think if you have to put a label onto what she did, we could address those AITSL Standards, but she didn't specifically say, you addressed AITSL Standard 2 here and you addressed AITSL Standard 3”* (Preservice Teacher 14). However, the preservice teachers were seeking explicit reference to, and feedback relating to them.

*I need it to be very explicit. I enjoy being told, you know, ‘This is what you're good at, but here's what you need to fix and here's exactly how to fix it’. So I think for me, giving feedback and referencing it with the AITSL Standards and aligning it to that would make it so much easier. (Preservice Teacher 5)*

This quote illustrates the desire for specificity and aligns with Standard 1.5 where teachers are expected to differentiate their teaching to meet the needs of each and every student across a range of abilities.

*I found a lot of the supervisors that I've had, they'd sort of come in, have a look at everything and then go, ‘Yeah, okay, you've done it or you've not.’ There wasn't a whole lot of actual support as far as ‘these are exactly the things that you're doing right in terms of, you know, catering for individuals,’ and that kind of thing. (Preservice Teacher 10)*



Instead, and contrary to what preservice teacher participants desired, the responses provided by the supervisors tended to be of a more general nature. While there are some references to APST by supervisors, there are also examples that reflect a lack of detailed knowledge as evidenced by, *“I see how they interact with students so I suppose it's ‘Know your students and how they learn and adapting to them’, which is Number 4? Is it Number 4?”* (Supervisor 5). It should be noted that Know your students and how they learn is Standard 1.

The data also indicated a lack of meaningful engagement with Standards 6 and 7. While there is some reference to these Standards proffered by preservice teachers, in the main, the interviewer needed to prompt participants as to how Standards 6 and 7 were assessed. Preservice Teacher 5 observed, *“especially like Standard 6 and 7, I don't think has ever been touched on with me by a supervisor”*.

### **APST-based Checklists: More than Just Ticking Boxes?**

Further to the evidence of limited reference to the APST by the supervisors when providing feedback, the data also indicated that there was limited advice and strategy via the APST. Rather, the evidence suggested that specific reference to the Standards presented in the use of checklists. These were used to assess preservice teachers' demonstration of each of the APST, in some cases with reliance on the mentor teacher who hosted the preservice teacher in their classroom. These checklists presented in the form of the Monitoring Tool, which is used as a formative assessment, and the Final Evaluation Form which was the summative assessment at the conclusion of the professional experience. The data indicated that the supervisors were using the Standards to assess progress and make final evaluations. However, there is little evidence that they were using them to provide detailed formative or strategic feedback to guide the novices through their learning journeys, rather just checking the boxes on the forms. The data also indicated that the occurrence of checklists for summative evaluation was more prevalent.

Evidence that the checklists were being used for formative assessment include this quote from Preservice Teacher 1 who said, *“we have a breakdown of all the AITSL Standards for a graduate and we kind of go through each standard and tick whether you know we're meeting that Standard or what we can do to meet the next one”*. However, there were data that suggested that this is not always occurring as intended and that the process has become somewhat of a ‘box ticking’ exercise. For example, Preservice Teacher 10 said, *“It was like ticking boxes, it was like, ‘Yes, you did it, no, you didn't,’ it wasn't more of a discussion about how you've done it, and what things you've done well”*.

The data indicated that that the APST were being used by supervisors for demonstration and evidence for summative assessment, rather than as a discussion point to improve performance. The following examples from both preservice teachers and supervisors support this contention. Preservice Teacher 15 recounted the comment from his supervisor, *“I've got to go by the book and make sure you tick off every single aspect even if it doesn't quite suit this context”*. Preservice Teacher 11 said, *“They were very thorough in going through the AITSL Standards with me to ensure that I was meeting them but I don't know that they necessarily pointed out which ones I needed to concentrate on”*. The following quotes provided further evidence.

*When it comes to looking at assessment of a lesson and all the rest of it, they have to be conscious of all of those standards because as we know if there's one standard that's below the line, then they'll fail the prac. So some do it really well and some don't, so I've kind of got to say, “Well*

*I've seen all of this, but can you demonstrate that? Can I have more evidence of this?"* (Supervisor 5)  
*She would actually print out all those Standards and then we would go against it and then she would say, "Okay you've met this. I'm giving you Outstanding for this, but I haven't really seen this so what can we do to prove that?"* (Preservice Teacher 14).

### **Reliance on Experience and Subjectivity**

As previously indicated, the novices were seeking specificity in the feedback provided by their supervisors, as they progressed towards *Classroom Readiness*. With the APST being rigorously applied throughout their university coursework, they sought reference to them when undertaking professional experience and receiving feedback from their supervisor.

However, rather than using the Standards meaningfully to guide progress and evaluate preservice teachers' performance, data indicated that the supervisors tended to rely on their own teaching experience and subjective viewpoints in their assessments. There is little evidence to suggest that at the point of providing feedback on the lesson, the APST formed part of this discussion. The following examples typified the responses with respect to feedback being based on personal teaching experience. When being asked about reference to APST in feedback, Preservice Teacher 6 said, *"I didn't actually get to that. You know these supervisors they give you comments more on how you do in your lesson, so the introduction, body and conclusion"*. Preservice Teacher 7 said the discussion was not focused on APST, *"more just strategies in the classroom"*.

Supervisor 12's response provided evidence of subjectivity rather than adherence to APST when they said, *"My personal philosophy is that the safe, supportive learning environment is absolutely essential"*. Further evidence included, *"The way I actually think of these students is would I like my own child, or my grandchildren now being taught by one of these people?"* (Supervisor 1), and *"when I'm developing that rapport with them, kind of sum up whether or not they've got the personality to be a teacher"* (Supervisor 5).

### **Standards 6 and 7**

Standard 6 includes engaging in professional learning and Standard 7 involves engaging professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community (AITSL, 2011). Both standards were identified as challenging to support and evaluate meaningfully. This was in part due to the fact that supervisors' visits were only scheduled approximately once every two weeks, where they watched the preservice teachers teach, and provided feedback on their lessons. With time constraints, there seemed to be insufficient scope during the visits to have discussions about strategies for meaningfully engaging with these two Standards. However, both cohorts of participants did indicate the level of the importance of them. Preservice Teacher 5 noted, *"But the deeper things, especially like Standard 6 and 7"*. Supervisor 6 observed, *"So it's difficult to tick them off against that in a meaningful manner"*, and expanded on this with reference to the real-world application of applying Standard 7, specifically Focus Area 7.3: Engage with parents/carers:

*But I don't think many ever get into the deep and intricate, or even difficult relationships with parents that then, you know, teachers actually get into. So I don't think they have that experience very often. And they*

*certainly don't want to have it very often. But often I sense they're probably not prepared for what might be about to come.*

## Discussion

The findings of this study presented evidence that there was limited meaningful application of the APST by supervisors in the assessment of preservice teachers on professional experience. Feedback provided by the supervisors was often subjectively related to their personal teaching experiences and philosophies and lacked specific reference to the APST. Further, the checklists provided by the university for both formative and summative assessment were being completed as required, but data suggested that completion of these was often to meet the criteria, rather than provide meaningful guidance, more so a 'box-ticking' exercise. These findings support the technical and reductionist effect of standards on teaching to which Loughland and Ellis (2016) referred.

Data also revealed that the preservice teachers, who have been taught and guided by the APST throughout their course, sought explicit feedback via the seven Standards. They were conversant with them, expected feedback to be related to them, and felt that this would improve their teaching practice. Preservice teachers observed that, instead, supervisors' feedback referred more to their own teaching experience and supervisor responses supported this contention. This may be due to the disconnection of the supervisors from the content of the university programs, leaving them reliant on personal experience (Buchanan, 2020).

Data suggested both the need for stringent application of the APST, yet potential flaws in supervisors' knowledge of them, as evinced by the example of Supervisor 5 who incorrectly referred to APST Standard 5. There appears to be scope to strengthen supervisors' detailed knowledge of all of the APST to better meet the explicit learning needs of the preservice teachers and deliver the consistency of assessment (Sim et al., 2013). Reference to the Standards needs to be more holistically applied, rather than merely checking them off against a list of boxes on an assessment form, to ensure the rigour to which TEMAG (2014) refers.

The findings of this study also reflected an interesting symmetry with the results from the fourth and final report on the evaluation of the APST (AITSL, 2016). This report indicated that preservice teachers reported the highest levels of positivity towards the Standards, whereas more experienced teachers had lower levels of positive attitude, and use of the Standards, as compared to teachers with less than five years' experience. The AITSL 2016 evaluation report also indicated that longer-serving teachers, such as those who undertake supervision (Buchanan, 2020), are less engaged with the APST and this is reflected in responses provided when questioned as to whether they refer to any of the Standards specifically. This is consistent with the findings, where supervisors, while adding the value of their experience, are in the category that have lower levels of positivity and uptake of the Standards.

While the supervisors, experienced teachers who lend their expertise to preservice teacher learning, may be having regular, meaningful discussions about the APST with the students, this was not evident in the data. There were clear indications of influences outside the mandated Standards that impacted supervisor decisions as to the classroom readiness of preservice teachers, such as their personal beliefs and 'gut feeling'. The disconnection of supervisors to university programs (Palmeri & Peter, 2019), and to the APST which frame them, could be attributed to the apparent lack of specificity to the standards. We acknowledge that personal philosophies and feelings, gained from years of teaching, factor in their decisions, and accept that one cannot remove one's humanity from the process. As

such, we do not believe that these considerations are invalid. However, the supervisory role is as complex as it is important (Burns & Badiali, 2015), and with TEMAG (2014) identifying a lack of consistency and rigour in the application of the Standards, more than teaching experience and personal philosophy must be relied upon to make these assessments. Given the central role that standards play in teacher quality globally (Mockler, 2020) and the focus that AITSL maintains on the APST to define effective teaching to improve students' educational outcomes (AITSL, 2011), it is crucial that this focus is translated to preservice teacher assessment.

Standards 6 and 7 were highlighted by both preservice teacher and supervisor participants as challenging to apply meaningfully, but were also emphasised as an important component of the APST. This aspect of teaching, engaging with parents, caregivers and the community, and in ongoing professional learning was seen as significant. However, as noted, at the university concerned, supervisors visit preservice teachers for two hours every two weeks, so with the requirement to watch a lesson and provide feedback in the visit, it can be difficult to find sufficient time to see evidence of caregiver and community engagement, and professional learning activities. Burns et al., (2016) noted the financial constraints under which ITE programs operate, leaving universities no option but to reduce the level of supervision offered to their ITE students (Parliament of Australia, 2007), which may account for the limited time supervisors have to gather evidence of all APST.

There are limitations to the study. The perceptions of only a small proportion of preservice teachers were explored, and from one university in Australia. More participants, and greater gender balance, may have enriched insights further. Those that did participate in the study may have particularly strong views on the posed research questions, potentially biasing the results. While proportionately more supervisors did participate, they may be the most committed, the best intentioned, or the most engaged of the cohort and different responses may have been received from less engaged staff. At the time of data collection, the Chief Investigator (CI) managed the administration of professional experience office at the university which may have affected the willingness of supervisors to participate. Although they have several years' experience in professional experience administration, any potential bias of preconception was mitigated by all transcriptions having been confirmed as correct by the participants and data analysis having been reviewed by co-investigators. The role of the CI did not present a conflict of interest in undertaking this project.

## **Implications for Future Research**

The literature is replete with examples of the complexity of the teaching profession (Boshuizen, 2016; Joseph, 2019; Polikoff et al., 2015), and the importance of appreciating this complexity is fundamental to attaining quality in teacher education (Loughran & Hamilton, 2016). The role of the supervisor is also equally complex (Burns & Badiali, 2015). With various contributors to preservice teacher learning and assessment, it is vital to understand the interactions between these contributors and the role that each of them plays. At its core, assessment must be based on agreed standards (Sim et al., 2013), but with this being challenging, future research must include investigation into the possibilities for improving supervisors' understanding of the APST and their articulation of them in the provision of feedback to preservice teachers. Given their positioning to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Cuenca, 2010; Deutschman et al., 2022), further investigation into the training of the supervisors and their interactions with both school-based mentors and university-based educators may assist in identifying possibilities for the improvement in consistency and rigour to which TEMAG aspires.

## Conclusion

We have established that Standards represent markers, or benchmarks, that offer a common set of norms by which students can be assessed (Brooks, 2021; Mockler, 2020; Sim et al., 2013; Swabey et al., 2010). Within the context of the Australian education system, the APST are the designated standards by which teachers are assessed and they are an important medium by which we endeavour to ensure consistency of application. The University Appointed Supervisors who are tasked with supporting and assessing the preservice teachers while on professional experience are an important resource who make a significant contribution to the preservice teachers' learning (TEMAG, 2014), and bring a wealth of expertise to the role. Trained by the university, they are also uniquely positioned to act as a conduit between the learning undertaken by students at university and the application of that learning on professional experience in the classroom. This must, therefore, include rigorous application of the APST.

This study sought to investigate the application of the APST by the supervisors who guide and assess preservice teachers on professional experience. Data suggested that the majority of supervisors were using checklists and evaluation forms supplied by the university, both of which contain a comprehensive list of the Standards and the 37 focus areas contained therein. However, there was little evidence to suggest that meaningful dialogue around the APST was occurring between the supervisors and those they seek to influence. With TEMAG (2014) recommending that Initial Teacher Education providers ensure rigorous, consistent and agreed assessment of preservice teachers against the Graduate level of the APST, these conversations, this formative assessment, would serve to augment the agreement and consistency of the application, and provide the preservice teachers with the explicit Standards-based feedback they seek. There is clear benefit in future research to better understand the application of the APST by supervisors, and to investigate methods by which to improve this pivotal aspect of their important work. Further, given the influence that supervisors can exert on preservice teachers' learning, and the impact they can have on their futures, research into the entire contribution of the supervisor is critical to better understanding and potentially refining the role.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is motivated to deliver a quality education system and with the APST providing the basis for discussions around, and assessment of graduating teachers' performance, it is clear that the TEMAG recommendations relevant to the Standards are being implemented. However, with so many supervisory staff overseeing preservice teachers in Australian schools, it is crucial that a model of supervision be developed to ensure that their role is clearly defined, to mitigate subjectivity and deliver uniformity. At its core, this model must have Standards to guide the assessment and achieve the rigour to which TEMAG refers. Given universities nationally are graduating thousands of *Classroom Ready* teachers per annum, the use of the Standards must be explicit and overt, to ensure the consistency to which TEMAG also refers. This notion is perfectly captured by the following quote from Preservice Teacher 14, "*I think if all teachers and supervisors and mentor teachers, if everyone starts wholly focusing on those AITSL Standards we're going to get better teachers*".

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