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Teacher Professional Standards: The views of highly accomplished special education teachers

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Abstract:
The Special Education profession played a central role in the development of the professional teaching standards for highly accomplished special education teachers. The findings of this study report on the views of the profession, identify common and agreed understandings about professional teaching standards and their relationship to teacher quality and teacher professionalism. The investigation carried out by members of the South Australian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education had three aims: to describe what accomplished teachers of children with special education needs value, know and practice; to advocate for the development of nationally agreed teacher standards, values and quality professionalism that will inform the current and future work of professionals in the field of Special Education; and to promote quality teaching and the advancement of the Special Education profession. Data was collected from a range of practising educators of learners with special needs in both country and metropolitan schools. These were analysed by the research group and the document “Standards for highly accomplished special education teachers” was compiled, printed and distributed to practitioners in the field.

Key Words
Values, beliefs, knowledge, Teacher Professional Standards, special education.

Introduction

Standards for the Teaching Profession: Here we go again! (Kennedy, 2000, p. 1).

The status of the teaching profession in Australia and elsewhere has been a topic of consideration over the past decade or so. The emphasis has been on enhancing the standing of the profession and considerable energy and expertise as well as resources have been devoted to establishing standards for accomplished teachers. Extensive research has also been carried out on standards for the teaching profession and the value of a collaborative approach to their development (ACE, 2001). The focus, according to Kennedy (2000), has been to encourage teachers to “reflect critically” on their practice, to assist them to improve their performance, to inform professional learning, “boost teachers’ self-esteem and their commitment to teaching” (p. 1), improve teacher education programs, instigate a national approach to registration and probation and communicate the nature of teachers’ work and quality teaching and learning. Boston (1999, cited in Kennedy, 2000) strongly supported professional standards developed by members of the profession, however, according to Kennedy (2000) he posed the following question when he addressed the issue of the status of the teaching profession at the 1999 Annual Conference of the Australian College of Education, Have we procrastinated too long in the undergrowth? Are we now having difficulty seeing the woods for the trees? Maybe beyond the bend, the road now opens up generously? And what about the road not taken? (p. 1)
Kennedy (2000) agrees with Boston that current and future work on teacher standards must involve teachers. He states, “This cannot be an academic exercise. It must involve those who will be most affected” (p. 2). This statement is also supported by the Australian College of Education (ACE) who, in a Statement on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism: Towards a Nationally Agreed Framework (2001) agrees that the teaching profession need to own and drive the exercise in partnership with key stakeholders. They recognise that both public interest and that of the teaching profession must be considered and that the standards must reflect an “accurate and comprehensive understanding of the nature of teachers’ work” (p. 1). Affirmation of the “status and integrity of teacher qualifications” was also considered important by ACE and they argued that transparency and accessibility to the profession and the wider community was also a central factor. It is also clear from the literature that while teachers have many skills and understandings, their accomplishments are less evident and not as well understood as those of members of other professions (Boston, 2002).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) in America began its work by identifying what they considered to be “in a generic sense the critical aspects of accomplished practice” (NBPTS, 1991, cited in Buss, 2000, p. 37). Buss states that the NBPTS established five core propositions that “define the knowledge, skills, dispositions and commitments that distinguish highly accomplished teachers” (p. 37). These core propositions state that teachers are “committed to students and their learning”, “know their subjects and how to teach them”, “are responsible for monitoring student learning”, “think systematically about their practice and learn from experience” and “are members of learning communities” (pp 37-38).

The Department of Education and the Arts: Queensland, state that the standards provide a “platform for teachers to identify and then drive their continuing professional development; inform program development for preservice education and represent the aspirations of the teaching profession (Department of Education and the Arts (2003, p. 1). The New South Wales Institute of teachers adds that the Professional Teaching Standards not only “describe, celebrate and support the complex and varied nature of teachers’ work” but they also outline “what teachers need to know, understand and be able to do as well as providing direction and structure to support the preparation and development of teachers” (New South Wales Institute of Teachers (2003, p. 1).

The South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services [DECS] (2005) recognises that research both global and local emphasises the importance of teacher quality and that it is the “single greatest factor in nurturing student achievement” (p. 1). They believe that the standards will influence teacher quality and student learning outcomes and provide the context for acknowledging the complexity and demands of teacher’s work. Marshall (2005) explains that the Professional Standards for Teachers (PST) are the result of extensive consultation and teacher input and that they are statements of what the profession values. These Standards not only provide statements against which practitioners are able to assess their strengths and identify professional learning needs, but they have also been created, according to DECS, “to promote teachers as reflective practitioners who seek to strengthen their professional values, knowledge and skills actively and creatively (DECS, 2006, p. 1). All professional associations have been encouraged to develop standards pertinent to their area of expertise.

**Background: Context for reform**

From 1996, according to Kennedy (2000, p.2) a “new discourse” emerged that focused on the “status of the teaching profession”. In 1997 at an Australian College of Education conference, the Teacher Education Standards and Guidelines Project that was designed to:
- develop national guidelines for initial teacher education;
- consider how the guidelines will support high standards of teacher education; and
- foster partnerships to enhance the quality of initial teacher education (Kemp, 1997, p.9)

was announced by Kemp. In 1999, however, Kemp noted that the outcomes of the project were, “frustrated by the complexity of the political contexts around teachers and teacher education” (p. 2) in Australia. The focus on enhancing the status of the teaching profession continued in 1999 and at the national Conference of the Australian College of Education that year, Boston, in his discussion on the issue of teacher quality strongly supported the development of professional standards by the profession (Kennedy, 2000).
In 2000 approximately 150 educators attended the National forum on professional teaching standards held in Melbourne to explore “contemporary issues, challenges and opportunities associated with such standards and to construct a framework for collaborative and strategic action” (Forum Delegates, 2000, p. 4). Participants in semi structured discussion groups formulated a set of “strategic intentions” which were modified and refined during the final plenary session. The strategic intentions covered the following, according to the working document that emerged from the National Forum:

- **Focus:** “on accomplished teachers, advanced standards of teaching practice and professional certification”
- **Ownership:** “Standards will be owned and driven by the profession”
- **Rationale:** “An explicit rationale for the development of standards will be developed”. It will provide “both vision and purpose for ongoing work on standards”
- **Links:** Existing work being conducted by national professional associations … will provide a significant base on which to draw”. Links with research and current development projects overseas will be established
- **Coherence:** “A coherent and consistent approach … will be promoted and communicated to multiple audiences”
- **Rigour:** “A rigorous approach to the development of standards and assessment structures will be established”
- **Collaboration:** “The commitment and support of key stakeholders will be secured … attention will be paid to working cooperatively with education systems and sectors”
- **Resourcing:** “Multiple sources of potential funding will be explored”
- **Capacity:** “A ‘connecting capacity’ at national level will be developed to guide future work on standards” (Forum Delegates, 2000, pp. 5-6).

The National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching was endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in July 2003. This decision was based on global research that recognised that learner achievement depended on teacher quality. In fact MCEETYA claims that global research confirmed “teacher quality was the single greatest factor in determining learner achievement” (DECS, 2006, p.2).

The professional associations in Australia supported the initiative to ensure that those who had the potential to be most affected by the professional standards, would be involved. It is from this initiative the South Australian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education engaged in this study with the aim to develop a document that would be circulated widely through out the Special Education profession.

**Professional Standards for Teachers**

Teacher professional Standards are statements of what accomplished teachers believe, know, value, and practice. These statements are consistent and cohesive and use common and agreed terminology designed to build capacity and to work towards National consistency. Their purpose is to:

- Provide a basis to strengthen the contribution teaching makes to learning outcomes for all children and students
- Enhance the status of the teaching profession and acknowledge its contribution to the wider community
- Improve the effectiveness of professional learning and development for the benefit of children and students and
- Make public the values, knowledge and skills of teachers which underpin their work with young people (DECS, 2006, p. 2).

According to McMullan (2004) the national task was to develop a national statement, code, declaration or framework for the teaching profession that makes explicit what Australian teachers know, value and believe about their work and their profession. This framework she argues, provides a common reference point to “inform the current and future work of key stakeholders and align political and professional forces to develop teacher standards, quality and professionalism” (McMullan, 2004, p.1).

Dinham (2002) cites Park (2001) a classroom teacher who notes the potential benefits of developing and adopting professional standards. Some points that Park makes in supporting the adoption of these standards are that they give recognition to teachers, improved understanding, provide a frame of reference for accreditation and registration processes, place greater emphasis on quality, and facilitate an “integrated approach to professional development” (p.8). However, McMullan (2004) points out that tension exists between focussing on standards that are discipline specific (eg special education teachers) or subject oriented (eg science and maths teachers) and those that all teachers can identify with.
Professional Standards for Special Education

Special education is an evolving field that experiences changes in relation to philosophy, theories legislation and policies, diverging viewpoints and evidence based principles. In addition, human issues and varying points of view, some historical, continue to influence the education and management of learners with disabilities (Turnbull, Turnbull and Wehmeyer, 2007). Special educators have a clear understanding of assessment, curriculum, program planning, approaches to teaching, diversifying instruction, resource needs, the range of technology and issues and concerns relating to meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities and those with special needs. Turnbull et al. (2007) claim that these professionals use their knowledge of how “issues of human diversity can impact on families, cultures and schools and how these complex issues can interact with issues in the delivery of special education services” (p. 423). They also recognise that these professionals understand the relationships between special education and regular schools and they use this knowledge to construct their understanding and philosophy of special education.

The Council for Exceptional Children, a leading advocacy and awareness agency for individuals with disabilities, established professional standards that address ten critical areas of professionalism according to Turnbull et al. (2007). These authors list them as foundations, development and characteristics of learners, individual differences, instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, communication, instructional planning, assessment, professional and ethical practice and collaboration.

Method

This qualitative study aimed to elicit views from the Special Education profession in order to establish what highly accomplished professionals in the field value, know, believe and practise. The committee of the State Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education established a planning group to compile relevant documentation, clarify the aims of the project, design the research approach and present their proposal to the committee. Special educators in identified special education roles were invited to participate. Data were collected from eight focus groups from metropolitan and country areas.

It was recognised by the research team that standards were not designed to describe the competencies, characteristics or attributes of special educators, but rather to “identify common and agreed understandings” about the specialised professional work of accomplished teachers in this field and “their relationship to teacher quality and teacher professionalism” (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 2).

Procedure

The Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers were developed through a process of consultation with educators in identified special educational roles. This document was designed to fulfil three purposes:

1. First, to describe what teachers of children with special education needs who are doing their job well value, know and practice
2. Second, to advocate for the development of nationally agreed teacher standards, values and quality professionalisms that will inform the current and future work of professionals in the field of Special Education
3. Third, to promote quality teaching and the advancement of the Special Education profession (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 1).

Before data collection commenced the background to the development of Teacher Standards, the purpose and the process of the data collection were outlined. Participants were then divided into four groups, and each group was given pens, postits and a large sheet of paper headed either Know, Value, Believe, or Practice. Participants were then divided into groups of four and each member was given an article printed on pink, blue, green or yellow paper. Groups were then reformed according to the colour of their article and given 5-10 minutes to read and discuss it. The idea was that they became “experts” on the information...
contained in their paper. Participants then returned to their original groups and relayed the information they had discussed to the members of this group.

Groups were then asked to think about the skills of accomplished Special Education teachers and to brainstorm ideas relating to their given heading. After five minutes groups exchanged sheets, read the topic on the new sheet and added ideas. This process was repeated until the sheets returned to their original group. Groups were then asked to examine the collective information and classify ideas under obvious themes, to debate and decide which were the three most important items and then to rank the remainder in their agreed order of importance.

**Professional Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers**

This section of the paper presents the findings of the data collection under four headings: professional values, professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional relationships. The Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers were compiled from these data.

**Professional values**

When asked what highly accomplished special education teachers value, participants reported that “Highly accomplished special education teachers value diversity, individual abilities and learning styles” (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 3). In addition, they noted the importance of research and reflective practice to update knowledge of contemporary trends and issues they believed underpinned practice. It emerged from the data also that highly accomplished special education teachers were perceived to valued students’ capacity for learning, inclusive practices, partnerships in teaching and learning, and ongoing professional learning. Participants believed that highly accomplished special education teachers also valued the individual’s right to active participation in all aspects of school life and the capacity of all young people with special needs to achieve. Embracing change, and collaborative consultative approaches to planning for learning that respond to student needs and are flexible, involvement of the whole school community and contributing to schools as learning communities were also listed as professional values.

**Professional knowledge**

In relation to professional knowledge an analysis of the data revealed that the professionals involved in the research believed that their practice was shaped and informed by knowledge of educational theory, teaching and learning, knowledge of the learner and of national and state legislation and policies. Participants believed that highly accomplished special education teachers have “a sound, coherent knowledge and understanding of a range of perspectives about learning, learning pathways, curriculum specific to the individual needs of the learner, accommodations, support options, resources and technology” (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 4). The data also showed that these professionals understand pedagogies and assessment strategies that facilitate learning and know about resources that provide access to student achievement. They are knowledgeable about inclusive practices, current research, curriculum, innovative practices, trends and issues (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004). In addition participants noted that highly accomplished special education teachers know how individuals learn and how to ensure that they have access to, and engagement in learning. They were also perceived to understand students’ disabilities and how they impacted on learning, their social and cultural backgrounds, their preferred method of learning and their diverse educational and psychosocial needs. It was also noted that these professionals have knowledge of national and state legislation and policies, local procedures, protocols and practices, how to implement them and how they impact on students with disabilities, learning difficulties and learning disabilities (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004).

**Professional practice**

Three critical areas of professional practice emerged from the data: professional learning and leadership, inclusive methodology and assessment. Under this heading it was established that
Highly accomplished special education teachers provide professional learning and leadership to the wider community. They model inclusive practices that cater for the diversity of learners. They are purposeful in providing access to learning and sensitive to the needs of learners and the teaching contexts (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 5).

According to the participants, these leaders in the field practice advocacy, use their skills to support professional learning, keep up to date with current research and lead colleagues, parents and allied professionals in consultative and collaborative practices. They support differentiated instruction, ensure curriculum is flexible, relevant and meaningful and “initiate and demonstrate processes for analysis and reflection to enhance learner engagement and educational outcomes”. They provide feedback to learners and maintain accountability through documentation. They value regular assessment and reporting of student progress and understand that teaching and learning is interconnected. They use inclusive assessment procedures that inform educational planning and recognise individual student’s needs.

**Professional relationships**

In relation to professional relationships the participants believed that highly accomplished special educators collaborate with a range of professionals, engaging actively in sharing expertise and connecting with professional groups, support services, agencies and networks. The belief was that they also plan and work collaboratively and promote learner engagement and achievement through the individualised planning process (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 6). It is stated in the AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers that, Highly accomplished special education teachers are committed to quality relationships with learners and their communities. They develop collaborative, professional partnerships and alliances for the achievement of successful outcomes (p.6).

The data also revealed that partnerships with students and their families were respected, valued and maximised. Mentoring was also seen as important as was “building capacity within their professional communities and empowering families” (AASE Standards for Highly Accomplished Special Education Teachers, 2004, p. 6).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Reid (2004) argues that, “If the task of teachers is to develop the learning dispositions and capacities to think critically, flexibly and creatively, then educators too must possess and model these capacities (cited in DECS 2006, p.4). The findings from the data collected by the AASE (SA) research team reflect the views of the profession. They relate to the highly specialised nature of the field and recognise the critical nature of the interaction between teachers and learners. The key elements centre on Values, Knowledge, Practice and Relationships. Values are clearly focused on the child and their rights to achieve learning outcomes in an inclusive environment where partnerships exist and are part of teaching and learning. Highly accomplished Special Education Teachers have a strong knowledge base in all aspects of their professional work. They have a sound understanding of the students they teach and how to ensure that they are able to participate in learning. Their professional knowledge includes disability awareness, child development, assessment and reporting, the impact of various disabilities on learning, and how engagement in learning can be enhanced and supported. It also includes a sound knowledge of legislation, policy, support services, theory and practice relating to special education. Professional practice focused on learner achievement and wellbeing. These teachers are perceived to be purposeful in engaging learners and sensitive to the need of all students. Critical to this area was clearly the ability to engage in professional learning and leadership, consultation, collaboration and advocacy. In addition, highly accomplished special education teachers ensured that young learners operated in safe, inclusive environments that supported differentiated instruction based on meaningful, relevant curriculum. Professional relationships are based on quality collaborative partnerships, shared expertise and connection with a range of support services and agencies. Highly accomplished special education teachers not only value partnerships, but they work creatively and constructively in a range of contexts both within and outside the school. In conclusion, the findings reflect the common and agreed understandings of professionals engaged in special education in South Australia. “Each element is interconnected and interdependent. In practice each is shaped by and congruent with the others and no
teacher activity will draw on any one element independent of the others” (AASE, 2004, p.1).
References

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