TEACHER PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS: A POLICY STRATEGY TO CONTROL, REGULATE OR ENHANCE THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

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

This chapter is organized around three questions: i. what discourses inform the standards debate and the development of teacher professional standards? ii. What are some emerging issues relating to teacher professional standards? and iii. What alternative strategies could the teaching profession itself use to seize the agenda towards a profession led strategy?

The political nature of the content and oversight of teacher professional standards is often underplayed by taking as unproblematic the meanings and objectives of standards policies. This may be an intentional strategy used by policy makers to promote a neutral and natural view of standards as good sense or common sense. As Andrew observes, “in this era of standards, writers use the term in many different ways, seldom bothering to unpack the differences in meaning; standards become the answer to all questions. They are thought to provide the magic ingredient to restructuring all education” (1997, p. 168). The very term has become a site of struggle between various interest groups – bureaucracies, teachers’ unions and teachers themselves.

Ball (1990) argues that policies are intended to bring about idealized solutions
to diagnosed problems. They embody claims to speak with authority, they legitimate and initiate practices in the world, and they privilege certain visions and interests. They set the limits for what can be thought and done in educational practice both inside and outside of classrooms. Policies and practices as they are developing in the UK and Australia relating to teacher professional standards can be seen in this way. The analysis of policy texts is useful here since such texts represent the legal obligations of teachers, the types of activities that are mandated by the state and how those activities are to be implemented and monitored.

Inherent in any policy document are a set of discourses that set the framework for what is to be represented and how it is to be enacted. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) capture the complexity of discourse which they describe as a set of related practices.

A discourse is composed of ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing and using tools and objects, in particular settings at particular times, so as to display or to recognise a particular social identity. ... The Discourse creates social positions (or perspectives) from which people are ‘invited’ (summoned) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognisable ways, in combination with their own individual style and creativity. (p. 10)

I have argued elsewhere (Sachs, 2003a) that managerial discourses shape the form and content of policies relating to teacher professional standards. These managerial discourses are concerned with ensuring public accountability, both through the language that is used but also by engendering a sense of ‘trust’ insofar as the application of ‘standards frameworks’ will improve the quality and provision of education. Within the current political climate managerialism presents a strong and authoritative discourse (Clarke, Cochrane, & McLaughlin, 1995). This is part and parcel of the transformation of the public sector worldwide over the past decade through new management reforms. A second, and closely linked phenomenon, is the current practice of policy borrowing – bureaucrats look to the policies of other systems both for reference and for comparability. These reforms with their emphasis on accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and economy have ensured a ‘sameness’ across many policy documents.

The policy texts and discourses around the issue of teacher professional standards compliment and are informed by the logic of public sector reform, in particular the need for education bureaucracies in general and teachers in particular to become more accountable not only in terms of what they teach but also how they teach. Accordingly as Strathern (2000) observes, managerial rationality is centred on the notion that institutional behaviour can be shaped if the right kind of reinforcement is combined with the right kind of information.

In this chapter I examine some of the rhetorics embodied in policies and debates concerning teacher professional standards in three national contexts and