

## **Professional knowledge and standards-based reforms: Learning from the experiences of early career teachers**

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*ABSTRACT: This article explores the paradoxical situation of early career teachers in this era of standards-based reforms, beginning with the experiences of an English teacher working in a state school in Queensland, Australia and expanding to consider the viewpoints of her colleagues. Our goal is to trace the ways she and the other early career teachers at this particular school negotiate the tensions between the current emphases on standardisation of curricula, testing regimes and teaching standards and their burgeoning sense of their identities as teachers. We shall raise questions about the status of the professional knowledge that these early career teachers bring to their work, showing examples of how this knowledge puts them at odds with standards-based reforms, including the professional standards recently introduced by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).*

*KEYWORDS:* Early career teaching, standards based reforms, curriculum and pedagogy.

### **KNOWING STUDENTS AND HOW THEY LEARN INTRODUCTION**

Teaching is, essentially, a learned profession. A teacher is a member of a scholarly community. He or she must understand ... the rules and procedures of good scholarship or inquiry. (Shulman, 1987, p. 9)

But the kids had no idea what they (“Curriculum into Classroom” units) were about. Yeah, we just adapted a lot of it. It was just...the new units that have come out, they assumed that the kids already have this prior knowledge, but these units are created, like they’ve done it from grade 10 all the way down to grade 1 or whatever.... (Marie)

Marie, a second year teacher, is describing her experiences of working with classroom resources developed as part of “Curriculum into the Classroom” (or C2C), a state-wide strategy initiated by Education Queensland. As Australia moves to implementing a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 10, C2C, according to the Queensland Department’s website, is intended “to support its schools with the implementation of the Australian Curriculum and to assist them to meet its goal for state schooling of one vision, one curriculum, one platform, different ways” (Education Queensland, n.d.).

This interview with Marie is one of a series of interviews that have been undertaken as part of a longitudinal study into the effectiveness of initial teacher education. “Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education” (SETE) is an Australian Research Council Linkage project. This study investigates graduate teachers’ perceptions of the

effectiveness of their initial teacher education course in preparing them for the variety of school settings in which they begin their teaching careers. It follows 2010 and 2011 graduate teachers in Victoria and Queensland during their first three to four years of teaching. The project uses large-scale surveys of Victorian and Queensland graduate teachers, together with case studies of 30 selected schools with highly diverse student populations to provide an evidentiary basis for policy decisions regarding teacher education and beginning teaching. Some of the questions that the project team addresses are: How relevant is what the graduates learnt in their initial teacher education (ITE) course to the challenges they face in schools? How well equipped are teacher education graduates to meet the requirements of the diverse settings in which they are employed? Does their view of the learning they experienced in ITE change over the time they take to settle into a school?<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we draw on interviews with graduates in one case study setting to consider how they negotiate the tensions between the increased national focus on teacher accountability, in the context of the move to national curricula, national teacher professional standards, national testing regimes, and their developing sense of their identities as teachers.

Marie's comments on C2C, in this third conversation in two years that we have had with her, show that she is ranging well beyond the stories that she and the rest of her cohort initially told us about their first year at Greater Stonington Secondary College<sup>2</sup>. It has been a characteristic of this particular cohort, which includes twelve early career teachers across a range of disciplinary areas, that over the two years, they have developed a lively sense of the institutional setting in which they are working beyond their own classrooms. Some have even taken on significant leadership responsibilities, in addition to their duties as classroom teachers.

The first round of interviews that we conducted with Marie, Fiona, and other early career teachers at this school elicited compelling narratives involving dramatic scenes in which they matched their wits against feisty adolescents. All the graduates discussed the sense of disjunction they experienced between their own values, as successful products of the Queensland education system, and the values of the teenagers at this school, who they felt were simply counting the days before they could leave. During their second year, however, these graduates began to place these experiences in a perspective deriving from their growing familiarity with the culture of Greater Stonington and the social milieu of the larger community. This has

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the school and for all participants

involved an increasingly refined sense of the needs and interests of the young people they are teaching.

Storylines abound in the professional world of teachers, ranging from “don’t smile before Easter” (at least if you are teaching in the southern hemisphere!) to poignant stories about the rewards that teachers derive from working with their students. These are part and parcel of staffroom conversations everywhere, but they also gain currency through teacher education programs and might even be traced in the neat sequential stages of the professional standards recently developed by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), the national statutory body that has responsibility for professional standards and the accreditation of teacher education programs. These standards map the career pathway of all teachers in a set of performance indicators from “graduate” to “proficient” to “highly accomplished” to “lead”, thereby constructing a storyline about the professional learning that teachers should experience as they advance through their careers. Each standard is accompanied by performance indicators, that serve as criteria against which the teacher may be measured.

Marie’s account of her attempts with colleagues to modify the resource materials provided by C2C might at first glance appear to conform to this storyline. In the terminology of the standards, Marie seems to be progressing beyond the “graduate” level to other levels of professional accomplishment. The performance indicators listed under 1.3 “Know students and how they learn”, where mention is made of “Students with diverse linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds” chart the progression of teachers as follows: “Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies...” (Graduate) to “Design and implement teaching strategies...” (Proficient) to “Support colleagues to develop effective teaching strategies...” (Highly Accomplished) to “Evaluate and revise school learning and teaching programs...” (Lead) (AITSL, n.d.). Marie’s story of collaborating to modify C2C in order to ensure that it meets the needs of the young people at this school (“yeah, we just adapted a lot of it”) could be read as evidence of a capacity to “design and implement teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds” (i.e., Standard 1.3 “Proficient”).

Yet if we listen further to Marie’s conversation, it soon becomes apparent that the storyline embedded in the AITSL standards fails to account for significant dimensions of her experience as an early career teacher.

Much more is going on in her professional life than a steady growth in her professional accomplishment as constructed by these standards. This is a story told to us not only by Marie, but also by other graduates at this school. Marie made her remarks in a focus group discussion that involved Fiona, whose disciplinary area is Special Education. Marie initially sums up the units of work that comprise C2C by saying that “at the end of the day they’re written by people that aren’t teachers”, whereupon Fiona gives her views from the standpoint of a Special Education teacher:

The amount of work to complete in a C2C [unit] isn’t sort of feasible. You can’t get through the amount of work that they put into a C2C unit and I’ve talked to a lot of primary school teachers that feel the same. But we, like Marie said, we do have the option to adapt them and they do need a fair bit of adapting to actually make it work in your classroom. But, as for Special Ed, the C2Cs don’t fit in with us at all at this

stage, you know, when you've got a class of 10 kids from prep level to grade 10 level, how do you make a C2C unit work for all those 10 kids?

And in response to Fiona's question, Marie continues:

And that's the other thing, like going on from that, there's just absolutely no differentiation in it whatsoever. It's aimed at such a high level that we've found, like, because we have such a variety of different students and such a large cohort, you can't target all of them. You need to be able to adapt it to...because, I mean, some of that stuff, I could not do with my classes because I have a fair few low level classes<sup>3</sup> and I had the same thing last year. You just have to make do with what you've got and then, you, as a teacher, need to differentiate. But it's definitely someone sitting down in a nice cushy office who's just creating this program.

Again, Marie registers her doubts about the expertise of the writers of the C2C units in comparison with the knowledge that she has developed about curriculum material suited to the diverse needs of the young people in her classes. Yet despite the fact that the knowledge and skills which Marie demonstrates when telling us about the way she and her colleagues have adapted C2C easily lend themselves to being classified as illustrating the AITSL standards, she might also be said to be marshalling her professional knowledge *against* those standards. Her immediate target is the one-size-fits all assumption that is reflected in curriculum resources like C2C. Her resistance arises out of a deeply felt sense, shared with Fiona and other early career teachers at this school, that the needs of her students cannot be met through the delivery of a standardised curriculum that fails to acknowledge that teachers must begin from where their students are at (cf. Britton, 1970/1975; Dewey, 1938). But Marie's struggle as an English teacher with a standardised curriculum also raises questions about the capacity of any authority to impose general descriptions of the requisite knowledge and skills of teachers everywhere, regardless of the specific institutional settings where those teachers work. This is a struggle with which all teachers engage, but is particularly problematical for early career teachers like Marie.

Our aim in this article is to explore this and other paradoxes in the situation of early career teachers in this era of standards-based reforms, focusing specifically on Marie's experience as an English teacher, although her comments may also be representative of teachers in other discipline areas. Much has been written in Australia, the UK, USA and Europe about standards-based reforms as means to address the contentious issue of teacher quality, as we will show in the next section.

We trace the ways that Marie and the other early career teachers at this particular school negotiate the tensions between such mandates and their burgeoning sense of their identities as teachers. They are arguably facing a degree of control that is unprecedented in education since the 1960s. But this does not simply amount to a crude attempt by governments to force schools and teachers to do what they are told. At stake here is the very nature of the professional knowledge that a teacher brings to her work, as is shown by the paradoxical status of Marie's knowledge as something that might be broadly categorised as illustrating key standards (specifically the dot points relating to the need to cater for diversity) and yet which also is at odds with

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<sup>3</sup> This description reflects the terminology used in the school to describe the classes that are all streamed by "ability".

attempts by standards' authorities to formalise what teachers everywhere need to know and be able to do.

## STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS AND EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

Understanding the complexities of early career teachers' experiences is hardly straightforward. Yet, as the variety and range of research literature suggests, the need to do so is seen as increasingly important in "...a time when there are more expectations than ever about teacher performance, but also at a time when teaching has been broadly and publicly disrespected" (Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 8).

Anderson and Stillman summarise the backdrop for the widespread reforms as:

...an historical moment characterised by popular outcry about educational inequity; widespread belief in teacher quality as the core lever for improving student achievement; tenuous debate about how to define, ensure, and reward quality teaching; and a policy climate marked by sweeping curricular reform, unprecedented scrutiny of teaching and learning, and expanding market-based initiatives that seek to privatise public education and deregulate teacher preparation. (2013, p. 4)

Against this backdrop, the introduction of teacher performance standards to lift teacher quality has been widespread. Literature from the UK (Christie & Kirkwood, 2006; Goepel, 2012), as well as Europe (Hartford, 2010; Storey, 2006; Tryggvason, 2009), the USA (Berry, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Delandshere & Petrosky, 2004; Paulson & Marchant, 2012), and New Zealand (Locke, 2006) tracks the contentious nature of such approaches, especially their generalising sweep vis-à-vis the particularities of the day-to-day lives of teachers and their students. Delandshere & Petrosky (2004, for example, suggest that "these attempts at reform are motivated by various forces, but appear to reflect an international convergence toward uniformity, conformity, and compliance" (p. 2). We suggest that this move to "accountability" should also be seen in light of a point made by Ahlstrom and Kallos as long ago as 1995 when discussing teachers and teacher education in Sweden. They noted:

...we hold that it is necessary to take into account the highly political nature of the current discussion concerning quality, at least in order to be able to analyse it also (and perhaps even primarily) as an ideological expression located within a specific context. (1995, p. 25)

In Australia, the AITSL standards are the latest attempt to regulate the "quality" of teaching and maintain surveillance regarding the "effectiveness" of teachers. Both terms, and the mandated standardised approaches, including the use of standardised tests, remain contentious. Berry, for example, argues that:

how we define "quality" and "effectiveness" in teaching and teacher training is also critically important, and is no simple matter. While new tools must be developed to identify effective teachers, policymakers should not be seduced by the prospects of relying solely on standardised test results as a means to determine who teaches effectively. Teachers make countless complex decisions each day, in often very different contexts, with wildly variable supports for their work with increasingly diverse students. (2010, p. 2)

Along with national standards for teachers, in Australia the last decade has also seen the move to national curricula, national standardised testing, most notably the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and the promotion of the “MySchool” website that allows for simplistic comparisons to be made between education systems among the states and territories, and between schools within individual states with regards to student outcomes as measured by NAPLAN. The annual national tests that all students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 must take, will, according to the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), “provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests. They also provide schools, states and territories with information about how education programs are working and which areas need to be prioritised for improvement” (n.d.).

Such regulatory regimes are often justified as being the result both of an increased recognition of the difference that highly competent teachers can make in the learning outcomes of their students (Larsen, 2010) and of the demands by successive governments for a well-educated workforce in order to ensure Australia remains competitive in the global marketplace, as most recently articulated in the *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). It is noteworthy that this is essentially a bi-partisan federal education policy, with both Liberal and Labor Governments progressively implementing a series of reforms that have led to increasing regulation of teachers’ work. Australia’s student outcomes as measured internationally by the apparent drop in PISA in comparison to some of the Asian countries has elicited political diatribes against teacher education programs and teachers from both sides of politics. Yet Finland’s teacher education programs (Finnish students have consistently topped the PISA measurement ladder) have remained steadfast in their commitment to developing the prospective teacher who is:

able to find solutions to situations and even to problems he/she experiences in his/her practical work. The noble aim of teacher education is an enquiring teacher who not only is able to problematise, but also to develop him/herself at work and his/her teaching as well as his/her way of promoting the pupils’ learning. (Tryggvason, 2009, p. 375)

Central to this conceptualisation of quality/effective teaching is an understanding that teaching is an on-going process of learning, and of developing problem-solving skills on the basis of context and in response to particular student needs. Britzman summarises the matter in this way: “Learning to teach—like teaching itself—is always in the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become” (1991, p. 8). These ideas are expanded by Cochran-Smith, who states:

...teaching is relational and is fundamentally about forming connections that scaffold learning. Good teaching is (at least partly) about developing loving and caring relationships with students as human beings and, at the same time, being deeply committed to ensuring that all students have rich opportunities to learn academically challenging material that will maximise their life chances. (2006, p. 11)

Teaching as relational and teachers as curriculum designers, able to differentiate content and pedagogies to ensure these are meaningful and engaging for *all* learners, would seem to be basic to teachers' work. They also are critically important ways to conceptualise the profession, supported by a large body of research literature over decades (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012).

## DEVELOPING SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

The relational character of teaching has emerged repeatedly in our conversations with Marie, Fiona, Aaron, Nola, Katie, Helen, Carol, Peter and Mary, all early career teachers who participated in our discussions. Our initial focus group discussions with them were peppered with gritty anecdotes about dramatic personal encounters with the young people in their classrooms. Rather than simply being stories about dealing with challenges to their authority as early career teachers, their anecdotes seemed to us typically to reflect the cultural divide these early career teachers experienced between their personal values, the expectations and knowledge developed through their teacher education coursework and the contrasting values of their students and the community they joined as graduate teachers. The community happens to be one that has benefited from the Australian mining boom, with the result that students at Greater Stonington expect to walk into relatively unskilled jobs and still earn very good pay. During the first focus group discussion, Aaron, in his second year of teaching at this school, reported one of his students as saying: "I don't have to listen to you, because I know that I can stuff around in class and still earn more money than you." Nola, in her first year at GS agreed and recounted how one of her students had declared: "I shouldn't have to learn this stuff – I want to be a tradie." It is noteworthy that for a number of these early career teachers such conflicts became the source of scrutiny of their own beliefs that education is central to success. The challenges they faced from these students forced them to reflect more critically on their own taken-for-granted assumptions and worked as stimuli for their own learning. This was evident in their discussions with us, when they used the focus group discussions to probe the meaning of these encounters in an honest and genuinely exploratory manner.

Nearly all the stories that they shared during our first visit to Greater Stonington reflected a desire to build "rapport" with the teenagers at this school, which became even more pronounced in the second and third round of discussions. All these early career teachers held the view that relationships are at the heart of good teaching, involving a growing capacity to respond to the needs and experiences of the young people in their classrooms. Their stories over time have reflected such growth. But their stories have been about much more than simply crossing the boundary between their own education and upbringing and the social milieu of their students. What has become apparent over the three visits to this school is that their attempts to establish rapport with their students are mediated by high-stakes, standardised literacy and numeracy testing (i.e., NAPLAN), and the curricula designed to prepare students for these tests.

This is a relatively recent development in Australia, unlike the situation in countries like the United States and England, where standardised testing for the purposes of school accountability is a well-established practice. The newness of the reform is

shown by the way these early career teachers repeatedly emphasised that they had encountered nothing like it. Here is what Nola had to say about her first few weeks at this school, when she admits how ill-prepared she felt as a first-year teacher for administering NAPLAN:

We did not do enough NAPLAN stuff [in the teacher education course] ... Holy moley! – Coming into this school and it's so NAPLAN focussed. Oh, it was like “What the heck? Yeah, I've heard about NAPLAN but---!” Everyone is like “NAPLAN, NAPLAN, NAPLAN” and I am just like--holy moley! I was not prepared for it. I did not know how to read the results or anything. I didn't know what it meant. I was like “NAPLAN?” I didn't know that NAPLAN was.

The overall aim of the research project in which these interviews have taken place has been to explore the effectiveness of initial teacher education in preparing graduates for the challenges they face in their first year of teaching. Thus, such statements pose challenges for teacher educators when it comes to ensuring that their pre-service teachers experience a professional learning continuum (Feimen-Nemser, 2001), as they make the transition from their initial teacher education programs into their first year of teaching. This is what Nola is responding to when she recounts her experience of entry into this school, where curriculum and assessment have been changed in preparation for NAPLAN. She goes on to describe the way the “NAPLAN format” permeates assessment practices at the school:

Well, I think it's like if you have any sort of year 8 or year 9 class – any activity sheet – it has to be in NAPLAN format so the kids are used to seeing it; they are used to answering that style of question. You have to have your NAPLAN-based key words in that which do relate to the curriculum but it's still a whole lot of extra work that you need. You can't just whip up an activity sheet. You have to spend an hour and a half formatting this thing and getting all your coloured dots in; making sure you've got a spelling activity; make sure you've got a grammar activity; make sure you've got a visual text activity; make sure you've got a text activity in this activity sheet because it has to be in NAPLAN format...

It is clear, from the comments of these early career teachers, that their transition into teaching is crucially bound up with their capacity to adjust to a regime that is heavily regulated by standardisation. Their attempts to build rapport with their students are mediated by standardised testing, generating conflict with the school administration and within themselves as they struggle to do what they are told.

This struggle has been primarily evident in a series of acute insights into the deeply alienating effects that such testing has on the students at Greater Stonington. Our discussions with these early career teachers have taken place against a background of concerns of the school's administration about poor NAPLAN results—which brought about mandated approaches to school curriculum to rectify this. For example, Katie, in her second discussion with us, commented:

Explicit teaching, explicit, explicit, explicit. It's so different (here) to when I went to uni. (There), it was all about discovery-based learning, student-based, like student-centred learning, and now it's going back to the old system of explicit teaching...and direct teaching. I know there's a place for it and it does fit in, but I don't think it's the be all and end all. I don't think every lesson should be direct teaching.



In addition to interviewing graduates, we interviewed the school principal on two occasions, when it had become apparent that she has been under intense pressure to lift the performance of students in the NAPLAN. The pressures that the principal had been experiencing were not necessarily visible to the graduates; indeed, their stories were often marked by a division between “them”, i.e., a school administration whose purposes remain opaque, and “us”, the early career teachers who are expected to operationalise the reforms. Although the school administration’s response to its NAPLAN results might be understandable (our interviews with the Principal revealed a dedicated educator who is very mindful of her responsibilities to the larger community), the graduates’ anecdotes provide a counterpoint to the model of school improvement imposed by NAPLAN, as the following exchange during our second visit to the school reveals. This took place six months after our first visit, when Nola had described the shock of her encounter with NAPLAN, and when the school’s most recent results had deteriorated even further, despite the attempts by the school administration to embed NAPLAN more firmly within the culture of the school. Helen, in her third year of teaching at Greater Stonington, and in her second discussion with us, described how she felt after the NAPLAN results for that year had been published on the *My School* website:

Obviously now that it’s public, it’s a reflection on your teaching as opposed to being used as a learning tool like it should be, I think. It’s become more of a reflection on our teaching, which isn’t necessarily true. I think the Year 9’s that came through this year were so bloody sick of NAPLAN that they all sort of went, “Who gives...?” [...] And you know the results suffered fairly heavily. So, and I sort of sat and wondered how much it had to do with...they just had NAPLAN rammed down their throats for the first two terms [...] also there was a period there where...I think we were talking about it, where we had to stop all teaching...that was all about NAPLAN, and I think that, I honestly think that probably killed a lot of the kids. I think the word “NAPLAN” became so negative that the kids just, yeah...

The passing of time since the first interview is shown by the way the shock of their initial exposure to NAPLAN has been displaced by sustained reflection on the effect that standardised testing, and the school’s responses to this, are having on their professional practice. Their reading of the ways in which their students have reacted to the relentless focus on NAPLAN reflects a developed ability to interpret young people’s behaviour as symptomatic of larger issues rather than simply individual students’ dispositions to obey or buck against rules. The teachers’ reflections reveal a capacity to evaluate NAPLAN within an analytical framework that presumably derives from their initial teacher education programs, when they acquired the language and concepts they need to work as educators. They have had to learn how to think and talk like this. The distinction between the long established use of standardised testing as “a learning tool” (i.e., Helen’s comments) as opposed to its use as a “reflection” of teaching—success or failure—captures the nub of the problem and speaks to the impact that such changes are having both on opportunities to differentiate curricula on the basis of students’ needs and the impact the use of such testing has on teachers’ engagement with their students.

By the time of our third round of interviews, these teachers were beginning to talk about NAPLAN tests as part of a school culture that demands that they completely align themselves with whole-school strategies directed at improving the school’s

results. This alignment was to be demonstrated by individualised professional development plans, as described by Carol:

not only is it (the PD plan) our personal development, it includes all the school's development like the positive behaviour management thing the school's doing. So all these other things and NAPLAN strategies, and that we actually have to agree to this and show them evidence and this is all going towards....if we do this, we then get bonuses.

Carol's comment occurred during a group discussion in which she and her colleagues explained how the school's curriculum and timetable had been changed so that teachers could train students to do NAPLAN for several weeks in the lead-up to the tests. This interview occurred when the process was in full swing. We hear the discomfort with this approach as an emerging standpoint that derives from the teachers' developing professional knowledge as educators. Concern with the processes was discussed by teachers from a range of discipline areas. Mary, a Mathematics teacher, had previously described the impact that the NAPLAN routine had on the Mathematics curriculum in Year 9:

It impacts on year nine's especially with Maths because we don't do any (maths)... the first four weeks of term two we don't do any curriculum at. All we do is just pick general Maths concepts. The aim is you're supposed to try and improve their general Maths knowledge, as well as improve their NAPLAN results, so we pick random topics out of the textbook to go through, but also every lesson we look at NAPLAN questions, we talk about how you've got the time limits to answer the question and how to answer it within the time, and make sure you answer every question and all that sort of stuff.

Such practices (essentially teaching to the test) are clearly reason for concern, even pessimism about the fate of public education in Australia within a policy environment where everything hinges on improvement measured by NAPLAN. Yet we also find the reflexivity and knowledge, that these early career teachers demonstrate, a source of hope. Similar to Marie, this is professional knowledge directed *against* standards-based reforms, not knowledge contained by them; such knowledge speaks back and about what accomplished teachers "should know and be able to do" in specific contexts, and in ways that graduate standards or NAPLAN results cannot. If their criticism of NAPLAN is reason for hope, it is because their professional knowledge potentially provides them with a critical perspective on the very standards that supposedly define the domains of their work as educators. But how might that potential be realised?

## PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS

The conversations with Marie and Fiona and the other early career teachers at Greater Stonington are full of paradoxes arising from the attempts by governments to impose uniform standards on schools and teachers. The importance of recognising diversity is reduced to discrete components of Professional Knowledge (e.g., Standard 1 "Know students and how they learn", 1.3 "Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds") within a construction of teachers' work that is overwhelmingly directed towards imposing the same scale of judgment on teachers

everywhere. This produces further paradoxes, where Marie's own professional knowledge is discounted in the context of a standardised curriculum that has been developed by others removed from the social relationships that she is obliged to negotiate each day to engage her students in meaningful learning.

Returning to Marie's story, it is evident what is at stake here. Her quarrel with C2C is not simply a question of material that might not be pitched at the right ability level. Marie is especially concerned about "engaging" her students:

Engaging, yeah 'cause, I mean, we've got, one of the examples of it (C2C) was we had an extract from H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*. Good. However, the kids don't engage with it because it's something that they wouldn't pick up. So we did use it but then we kind of expanded on it, so let's look at time travel itself and...so and we've got a few Dr Who aficionados in our staffroom so, yeah. So they've been using that and one of the other things was they had to view film trailers.... So I went and found trailers that were actually relevant to the kids, I mean, and they had a ball. I just adapted the task and made my own graph and they had to do it themselves and they loved it, like, you know, *Clash of the Titans* and what genre does this fit into and...

Experienced English teachers would be familiar with the strategies that Marie describes, as she assembles resources that might enable her students to engage productively in this unit on speculative fiction. She has not necessarily jettisoned *The Time Machine*, but is attempting to find contemporary texts within the same genre that might prompt students to see H. G. Wells' story as an interesting precursor of texts with which they are more familiar. She gestures towards the complexities of classifying any text, showing that she is aware of debates within the field of literary studies relating to the nature of genre.

Marie's critique of C2C and other standards-based reforms arises out of her ethically responsive stance towards the specific needs of students within this particular setting. As an engaged and skilled curriculum designer, Marie is able to adapt and differentiate the work because she *does* know who her students are and what they need to do.

However, the generic character of the AITSL standards means that they can hardly serve as a framework to represent the complexity of Marie's professional learning as an English teacher stepping outside the institutional space of her initial teacher education program into the institutional space of the school in which she is teaching. The notion of diversity, for example, is rendered absurd when conceptualised as discrete performance indicators within a representation of teachers' professional knowledge, practice and engagement that supposedly applies to all teachers everywhere. Such standards construct reality as though it comprises individual teachers whose social relationships are secondary. Those individuals may happen to work together—indeed, it is crucial for some of those individuals to develop leadership qualities that will enable them to coordinate the actions of others (if they are to ascend the AITSL scale)—but the primary reality is the individual teacher whose actions must be judged against reified standards of performance.

We suggest that a more generative starting point for understanding the complexities of professional practice and school communities would be to begin with the way people work collaboratively within culturally specific settings in order to achieve shared

goals. This is effectively the point of departure for the critique that Marie and her colleagues offer of the school in which they are working. They are immersed in the rich social life of the school as they enact it each day, and resentful of the way in which an anonymous external authority seeks to organise that life, rendering it into something strange and alien. Standards-based reforms might mandate collaboration, but this is always directed towards achieving goals such as standardised test scores or other prescribed outcomes that have been imposed by an external authority. As a result, the capacity of individuals to collaborate in educationally productive and professionally satisfying ways is always in tension with managerial structures that represent their work as something that can be itemised and measured.

But the ultimate paradox in Marie's and her fellow early career colleagues' situation is the way in which the world of standards-based reforms in which she is starting her career effectively discounts the knowledge that she brings to her work. Yates and Collins have commented on the "absence of knowledge in Australian curriculum reforms" (Yates & Collins, 2010), seeing this as a consequence of imposing learning outcomes crudely organised around constructions of cognitive development, unanchored within any robust understanding of the principles of inquiry that constitute each curriculum area. This is happening at the very time when there is also rhetoric about the need to equip young people with the capacity to develop the knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of the future. Marie's story of her experience with C2C, is one where knowledge has been located elsewhere (in the heads of the "experts" that she scathingly refers to as sitting in their cushy offices), rather than as something that emerges through the interactions that she scaffolds in her classroom and develops through collaborative work with colleagues.

That Marie has been working against the grain, questioning the authority of curriculum experts who are located outside her school community, raises disturbing questions about where her professional knowledge sits within the heavily regulated policy environment in which she is teaching. For what is her resistance other than a proper insistence on her disciplinary expertise as an English teacher?

Years ago, Shulman argued that teaching is "a learned profession", that a teacher "is a member of a scholarly community" who understands "the rules and procedures of good scholarship or inquiry" (Shulman, 1987, p. 9). Yet his key point was that a teacher's knowledge extends beyond knowledge of a disciplinary field, that the difference between a scholar and an educator involves a capacity on the educator's part to develop strategies that would enable others to enter into the modes of thinking and feeling that characterise the field—or what Shulman famously called "pedagogical content knowledge" (1986). Content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge are crucially bound up with one another, vital dimensions of a teacher's professional identity.

This might be characterised as a "classical" model of professionalism that has since been displaced by other definitions (see, for example, Doecke, Locke & Petrosky, 2004; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996) that reflect contemporary conditions, especially with respect to the changing nature of knowledge. The model of the teacher that Shulman advocates, which is identical to Connell's "humanist model of the good teacher" (Connell, 2009, p. 218), is nonetheless a powerful legacy. Indeed, it is still arguably at the core of how English

teachers understand their work (Reid, 2003). The effect of standards-based reforms may very well be, as Connell has argued, to reduce the humanist model of the good teacher to an “anachronism” (Connell, 2009, p. 218), but if this is so, we must seek ways to make those who are responsible for this development accountable for the full implications of their actions. Their own discourse of “accountability” should be turned against them by making them explain why they are compromising teachers’ capacity to be fully responsive to the needs of their students.

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Greater Stonington is only one example of a school that is being radically transformed by standards-based reforms. No doubt early career teachers at another school and in other states, would have different things to say about how their experiences of their first years of teaching have been mediated by the current policy landscape. But the variety of the responses of these teachers reflects the fact that each school is unique. While, for the purposes of statistical analyses, it may be possible to identify “like” schools (a key consideration when interpreting the NAPLAN data on the *My School* website), such generalisations always do violence to the specificity and diversity of the schools into which early career teachers step.

The AITSL standards construct a neat continuum from “demonstrating knowledge” of “teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds” (Graduate Standard 1.3) to “designing” and “implementing” those strategies (“Proficient” Standard 1.3). This curiously embeds a familiar distinction between initial teacher education as giving pre-service teachers a knowledge “about” education that somehow floats above practice, as opposed to equipping them with the capacity to engage in “praxis”, drawing on the theoretical resources available to them in order to make sense of the complexities of the concrete situations in which they find themselves. The professional lexicon of the AITSL standards does not include words like “praxis” or any language that highlights the importance of theoretical reflection and continuing inquiry into teaching and learning. The standards, as they are formulated for higher levels of accomplishment (i.e., “proficient”, “highly accomplished” and “lead”), are all about a growing capacity to implement teaching “strategies” that improve “learning” evacuated of any meaning. They deny the ways that teachers participate in the construction of their own and others’ knowledge, positioning them instead as technicians who replicate existing knowledge. Given what the early career teachers at Greater Stonington have said to us about NAPLAN, one could be forgiven for thinking that teaching and “learning” are simply things that are done to enable students to sit for NAPLAN tests.

Our concluding point, however, is an epistemological one about how we can actually learn from the experiences of Marie and other early career teachers as they move from their teacher education programs into schools. By and large this is a step from the known into the unknown, in that any institutional setting is characterised by its own way of doing things and by certain “knowledge” that anyone new to the place is obliged to learn. Yet, as the stories of the graduates at Greater Stonington have revealed, early career teachers are not simply stepping into a new institutional space, but into a new set of social relationships: with colleagues, with the school

administration, with students, with parents. They are obliged to negotiate those relationships as part of a collective effort to renew the culture they share each day. This is not necessarily a barrier or a constraint. Stepping from the known to the unknown is one way of characterising creativity, namely a capacity on the part of human beings to realise potential that they may not even have anticipated (cf. Williams, 1977). Who would want to pin down in advance what happens when early career teachers step into a classroom? The early career teachers at Stonington have furnished us with plenty of anecdotes about the potential of such encounters.

The starting point for understanding the experiences of early career teachers is inevitably the social world of their school, which in turn prompts us to think about how to represent that world in all its complexity. We have already indicated our deep concerns about how the AITSL professional standards are being imposed on the profession, artificially constructing the work of teachers as comprising a set of discrete domains that fail to do justice to their professional practice as something lived and embedded in social relationships. The introduction of a scripted curriculum and the impact of this on teachers' work are yet to be adequately assessed. The individualistic focus of standards is belied by the conversations of graduates at Greater Stonington, where they showed that professional knowledge is something socially constructed and shared, something that exists in the social space they share as members of the school community.

Where does this leave us? In the first instance, we might try to listen to the voices of early career teachers, acknowledging the deeply situated nature of their thoughts and feelings as they respond to the social settings in which they find themselves. This also means understanding their experiences without allowing our reactions to be unduly shaped by the way authorities like AITSL construct their professional trajectories, specifically avoiding the most reductive aspects of the AITSL standards, which construct early career teachers as being at the bottom of the ladder, treating them all as blank slates, and discounting their autobiographies as vital frames of reference for further experience and growth (cf. Dewey, 1938; Doecke, 2013).

Crucially, as implied by the subtitle of our article, we should position early career teachers as experts with respect to the complexities of their professional learning, or as "experts in the making" (cf. Gill, 1998). The early career teachers at Greater Stonington have readily embraced opportunities for continuing professional learning, including positions of responsibility that extend beyond their classrooms. But they are also experts in the making in another sense, in that their induction into the profession is unique to this historical moment. What they are experiencing cannot be fully captured by the experiences and understandings of a previous generation. Researchers, teacher educators and bureaucrats alike need to learn from what they report about the contradictory nature of their situations.

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