



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

# Professional Standards for Teachers and Teacher Education: Avoiding the Pitfalls

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**April 2006**

**PPTA**

NEW ZEALAND POST PRIMARY  
TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

TE WEHENGARUA

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**ISBN 0-9582633-3-7**

## **Executive summary**

Professional standards for teachers and teacher education can be 'generic' or 'specified'. Generic standards are broad descriptors of teachers' skills and knowledge. Specified standards attempt to define more precisely what is to be taught, what would count as evidence of the quality of that teaching and what would count as meeting the standard. Specified standards are explicitly intended to allow an assessor to make judgements about teacher performance. New Zealand has a history of favouring generic professional standards but there has been some recent interest amongst academics and policymakers in specified standards.

This paper offers four arguments against introducing specified standards for New Zealand teachers and teacher education. First, specified standards hold much greater capacity than generic standards to control and contain teachers. Specified standards control teachers by asserting the perspective of the standard-setter over the practitioner. When developed by governments influenced by neo-liberalism as in New Zealand, such standards can be expected to reflect the neo-liberal policy technologies of managerialism and performativity. They clearly represent a significant loss of pedagogical autonomy for teachers.

Second, and related especially to the effects of managerialism and performativity, it is unlikely that specified standards will lead to the improvements in teaching quality their proponents claim. Specified standards will intensify teachers' workloads and push teachers towards impression management, for instance fabricating evidence to meet requirements. Authenticity can be expected to be stripped out of the teaching and learning process as teachers 'jump through the hoops' of specified standards.

Third, the claim by proponents that specified standards will be detailed enough to reflect the complexities of teaching is highly problematic. Although research is

increasingly pointing to the significance of local contexts, most current research is not contextualised enough to support the development of specified standards.

Lastly, where the adoption of specified standards in New Zealand has been mooted, the analysis has often overlooked or hurried over criticisms of specified standards in other national settings and indicated little understanding of what is distinctive about New Zealand education policy and practice. Specified standards could come to assume too much importance in New Zealand both because of the central role the current government gives to teacher quality in explaining levels of student achievement and because of New Zealand's culture of teaching.

The paper concludes that for all the above reasons, specified standards for New Zealand teachers and teacher education will not be beneficial and professional standards should remain limited to generic standards. Generic standards require a higher trust approach to the issue of professional standards but are a sensible response to the paradox that the more managerial and performative pressure is placed on teachers, the less authentic their teaching will become.

## About this paper and the author

This paper has been commissioned by the two teacher unions, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association / Te Wehengarua and the New Zealand Educational Institute / Te Riu Roa, to inform the debate around professional standards for teachers and teacher education in New Zealand.

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## 1. Introduction

To many New Zealanders, including many teachers, it may seem impossible to argue against professional standards for teachers: as with 'choice' and 'quality', professionalism and standards in teacher education and for practising teachers seem to make perfect sense. Yet just as researchers have illustrated that 'choice' in education is often a mirage (Lauder et al., 1999), and 'quality' processes in education generally lead to mediocrity (Inglis, 2004), it is precisely because the public and professional appeal of professional standards can be politically exploited that it is important to be searching about what professional standards actually do and the impact they could have. For as Gerald Grace has observed, the ideologies and discourses of professionalism - and the same may be said about professional standards - can be deployed both 'by teachers to improve their terms and conditions and their enjoyment of social status and occupational autonomy' or 'made to serve the interests of the state for control and containment of teachers' (Grace, 1987, p. 195).

When thinking about the purpose and impact of professional standards for teachers, a key distinction needs to be drawn between content and performance standards, or what will be called here 'generic' and 'specified' standards. *Generic standards* are broad descriptors of teachers' skills and knowledge. Their level of generality makes these standards most appropriate for providing broad guidance and direction only (Miles, 1957) although generic standards are currently being used in New Zealand for evaluating performance as discussed below. In contrast *specified* standards are explicitly intended to allow an assessor to make judgements about teacher performance. They go beyond the general definitions of good teaching found in generic standards to attempt to define more precisely what is to be taught, what would count as evidence of the quality of that teaching and what would count as meeting the standard. To do this requires the development of operationalised definitions, concrete examples and scoring rubrics. Although often called performance standards, I prefer to call these

standards specified standards in order to draw attention to the way they attempt to define much more explicitly what and how teachers should teach and also the way they require teachers to respond to standard-setting agendas beyond their control.

Although specified professional standards for teachers have been developed in other countries, especially the US, it is generic standards which have been favoured in New Zealand to date, even for evaluating performance. For instance it was an officially claimed strength of the 'Satisfactory Teacher Dimensions' that they were '...generic so that they can be applied to teachers in a variety of teaching settings' (Ministry of Education, 1997a, p. 3) and yet they were also intended to be used for performance management. The professional standards included as part of collective contracts negotiated between the Ministry of Education and primary, secondary and area school teachers and used for pay progression purposes are also generic standards (Ministry of Education 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Even 'performance indicators' such as those recently used by the Education Review Office to evaluate the quality of beginning teachers (Education Review Office 2004) or those included in the *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers* (Ministry of Education 2004a) are generic. As Grudnoff, Hawe and Tuck (2005, p. 96) note:

In New Zealand we often confuse content [generic] standards or criteria with performance [specified] standards. Moreover when agencies construct performance indicators...they are of such generality they are best regarded as criteria or content [generic] standards.

There are likely to be both technical and political reasons why generic standards have been preferred over more detailed specified standards in New Zealand. It is easier and less expensive to develop generic standards because their level of generality requires less detailed work and allows consensus. New Zealand teachers have also been long concerned about the potential of too-detailed

standards for controlling the teaching workforce and sceptical of them on pedagogical grounds. An analysis by Sullivan (1999) shows how both the PPTA and NZEI resisted the linking of pay to detailed standards in the 1990s and a more recent PPTA briefing paper on the New Zealand Teachers Council suggested that 'There is no evidence that writing standards for teachers has ever of itself improved the quality of teaching' (PPTA Executive 2005:10). Teacher educators have also resisted the imposition of detailed standards. When the New Zealand Qualifications Authority attempted to determine more than 200 unit standards for initial teacher education in the 1990s these were resisted in various ways and never formally adopted or registered (see Alcorn, 1999, pp.115-116).

Whether New Zealand policymakers will follow the recent trend in (some) other countries towards specified standards remains to be seen. The New Zealand Teachers Council is still developing its position on standards. It recently commissioned a literature review from Elizabeth Kleinhenz and Lawrence Ingvarson at the Australian Council for Educational Research who are proponents of specified standards (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson 2005)<sup>1</sup>. However the draft *Standards for Graduating Teachers* just released by the Teachers Council are generic (NZTC, 2006a). The Ministry of Education wants a more comprehensive and aligned set of standards and sees this as a means of improving the quality of teacher education and teaching (Ministry of Education 2004b, see also Grudnoff et al., 2005).

In their paper prepared for the Teachers Council, Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2005) have argued that specified standards would have important advantages over the generic standards currently used in New Zealand:

While [the Satisfactory Teaching Dimensions] provide a good example of a set of generic teaching standards, they may best be understood as a set of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, (2003); Ingvarson, (2002a); Ingvarson (2002b); Ingvarson (2003).



principles to guide the development of subject and year level specific standards (e.g. for teachers of Science, English or Early Childhood). Valid standards capture what good teachers know and can do. Generic standards do not do this. For beginning teachers especially, it is important to drill down further. (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2005, pp. 45-46).

Few New Zealand academics have supported the introduction of specified standards. Hattie (2001, 2004) is similarly enthusiastic about proposing specified standards as Kleinhenz and Ingvarson but envisages them developed by a national board which is independent of government. A recent article by Grudnoff and colleagues (2005) is more questioning of specified standards and calls for teachers to be closely involved in their development:

Ultimately if any evaluation of teachers' practice is to impact positively on teachers' understanding of their practice, then the teachers and evaluators must be part of a community of interpreters...who share norms of practice and agree on what constitutes appropriate evidence of instances of good teaching in a particular context. (Grudnoff et al., 2005, p. 100, citing William, 1996).

Although it may be argued that the involvement of teachers is the best way to develop appropriate specified professional standards, an alternative view is that New Zealand education would be better not to go down the path of specified standards at all. This is the perspective taken in the present paper which provides four main arguments against introducing specified standards for New Zealand teachers and teacher education.

First, specified standards hold much greater capacity than generic standards to control and contain teachers. Specified standards control teachers by asserting the perspective of the standard-setter over the practitioner. When developed by governments which is most likely to be the case in New Zealand, and when

developed by governments which are influenced by neo-liberalism as in New Zealand, such standards can be expected to be a variant of the neo-liberal policy technologies of managerialism and performativity, which have been used by governments around the globe to control teachers and the taught curriculum for more than two decades now. By no means benign, specified standards clearly represent a significant loss of pedagogical autonomy for teachers, a loss which will not benefit pupils (parents, the general public) either.

Second, and related especially to the effects of managerialism and performativity, it is unlikely that specified standards will lead to the improvements in teaching quality their proponents claim. As has been well-documented with other similarly managerial and performative interventions like high-stakes testing, target-setting and inspection, specified standards will intensify teachers' workloads and push teachers towards impression management, for instance fabricating evidence to meet requirements. Authenticity can be expected to be stripped out of the teaching and learning process as teachers 'jump through the hoops' of specified standards, for instance teachers will become less able to directly respond to students' needs.

Third, the claim by proponents that specified standards can be detailed enough to reflect the complexities of teaching is highly problematic. This is both because research is increasingly pointing to the significance of local contexts and because most current research is not contextualised enough to support the development of specified standards. In contrast, generic standards make no claim to be able to reflect particular contexts and conditions. It is an open expectation that they will need local interpretation by teachers, school leaders and teacher educators and will therefore be inappropriate for making high-stakes judgements about teacher performance.

The last argument against specified standards considered in this paper reflects the need for New Zealand educators to take a careful approach to international

policy borrowing. Where the adoption of specified standards in New Zealand has been mooted, the analysis has often overlooked or hurried over criticisms of specified standards in other national settings and indicated little understanding of what is particular about New Zealand education policy and practice. For instance, there is little discussion of the policy problems specified standards could be expected to address (or create) in New Zealand education. Specified standards could also come to assume too much importance in New Zealand both because of the central role the current government gives to teacher quality in explaining levels of student achievement and because of the culture of teaching in New Zealand.

These four concerns will be considered here in turn, leading to the conclusion that, rather than rolling out a substantial regime of specified standards, professional standards for New Zealand teachers and teacher education should remain limited to generic standards. A better way to improve the calibre of teaching in New Zealand will be to sustain and inform the existing professional culture of teaching through teacher-led programmes of excellent, critical, professional development.

## **2. The impact of specified standards on teacher autonomy**

Seen from a historical perspective, professional standards reflect a long tradition of governments of both left and right promoting images of 'good' teaching, which reflect larger social and economic agendas they hope teachers will take up. However since it is generally recognised that such images cannot simply be imposed on the teaching workforce, dominant groups within the state are engaged in a subtle politics of persuasion (O'Neill, 2005). Fundamentally this is what the drive for professional standards for teachers (whether generic or specified) is all about: an attempt by governments to get teachers to 'buy in' to their preferred version of the 'good teacher'.

Nevertheless proponents of specified standards claim they will be politically empowering for teachers and their organisations. For instance:

The absence of a credible and accepted method to recognise outstanding teaching sends a message that good teaching is not valued, that it is easy to assess (particularly by untrained observers) [and] that the profession does not take itself or its responsibilities seriously. (Hattie, 2004, p. 3).

and:

Without a demonstrated capacity to define and apply standards, a profession is defenceless against policies that may run counter to quality practice and conditions that enable practitioners to do their best. (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2005, p. 1).

Kleinhenz and Ingvarson also argue:

Profession-wide standards provide a more valid basis for teacher accountability than performance management schemes and standardised tests of student outcomes (p. ii).

Such arguments appear naïve when specified standards are linked to the wider neoliberal agenda of school reform. The key elements of the neoliberal reform package are embedded in three interrelated policy technologies: the market, managerialism and performativity (Ball, 2003) with professional standards relating especially to the last two of these. Central to *managerialism* is indirect rather than direct supervision of public sector employees and organisations and the ability to 'steer from a distance' through reporting, monitoring, outcome measures and performance targets rather than through traditional, bureaucratic, line management approaches. Within managerialism professional standards represent another form of regulation and control alongside target-setting and

performance management while professional standards bodies can be seen to fit within agency theory as one kind of response to the neoliberal concern with 'provider capture'. This is because much of agency theory is concerned with determining the best form of contracting between principal (in this case, government) and agents (in this case, teachers), including the best way of motivating the latter, so as to reduce the likelihood of poor performance due to self-interest and opportunism (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1998).

As described by Gronn (2003, pp. 8-10), professional standards are a type of social technology comprising codified abstract rules or norms intended to regulate behaviour by governing and legitimating modes of human conduct. They are:

... vehicles for the steerers of systems to micromanage the day to day work of institutional personnel by seeking to ensure adherence and conformity to officially sanctioned codes of conduct ... In some respects standard-setting and standardisation can be seen as the final piece in the mosaic of new managerialism ... As a means of bringing allegedly recalcitrant occupational groups to heel, in order to make them responsive to client interests, and to discipline their work performance in the pursuit of advantageous national positioning for a competitive knowledge economy, standards regimes [have] proved irresistible to governments.

Professional standards are also about *performativity*, which brings to the fore the cultural impact of managerialism. As Ball (2003, p. 216) describes it, performativity:

... employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of

'quality' or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement.

Ball (2003, pp. 216-7) goes on to make a number of points about performativity. The first is that the issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial. Who is it, he asks, that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance? Second, the apparent objectivity and hyper-rationality of the technology of performativity is misleading. What it actually does is translate complex social processes into simplistic figures or categories. Third, performativity not only changes organisations but brings about new subjectivities: in the case of teachers it not only changes the work of teachers but changes what it actually means to be a teacher.

These points are highly relevant to understanding the impact of specified standards on teachers. While this is discussed in the next section, it is important to initially consider whether it is teachers or policymakers who will really have control over standard-setting in New Zealand. For while wholly teacher developed specified standards would not be problem-free<sup>2</sup>, it is specified standards determined by reforming policymakers which are most likely to have performative effects.

In New Zealand the New Zealand Teachers Council is the national body which has been pursuing professional standards for teachers. An international review by Alcorn (2004) illustrates that such bodies vary in the context in which they are established, their composition and the legislative authority they carry. In considering whether it is teachers or policymakers who would really control standard-setting by the Teachers Council, it is therefore crucial to consider the background of the Teachers Council, its legislative mission and its recent

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Grudnoff and colleagues (2005) discuss the limitations of consensus as a basis for deciding standards.

approaches with regards to professional standards.

Upsall (2001) and Alcorn (2004) lay out much of the background to the Teachers Council's current interest in professional standards. The Education Act of 1996 made teacher registration compulsory again after a period during which it was optional. It increased the responsibility of the then Teacher Registration Board (TRB) to ensure teachers continued to meet 'satisfactory teacher' standards throughout their careers and led to the publication of the TRBs 'Satisfactory Teacher Dimensions' which were developed through 'a broad consensus of agreement' (Ministry of Education, 1997a). As noted earlier, although generic, the Dimensions were intended to be linked to schools' performance management systems, and generic standards became further linked with pay progression in New Zealand when they were included in collective agreements with the NZEI, PPTA and Area Schools (Ministry of Education, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c).

The late 1990s also saw the beginnings of the development of the present Teachers Council. In 1997 National published a 'Quality Teachers' green paper (Ministry of Education, 1997b) which argued for the establishment of a government body to promulgate professional standards for teaching. Labour instead took up the idea of an 'Education Council' and after it won the election in 1999 a working party comprising representatives from PPTA, NZEI, School Trustees, Early Childhood and Kura Kaupapa began work on the detail.

Alcorn (2004, p. 137) notes that teaching councils are positioned between teachers and government 'so that striking a balance will be difficult and full of tension'. She argues they should be independent, 'refus[ing] to be captured either by political pressures or by the views of teacher unions or other pressure groups' (2003, p. 139). On the other hand Sullivan (1999, p. 152) has argued that a professional body created by government will 'create the opposite of what a professional body should be. The intention is to extend government control over teachers' conditions of service rather than to empower them as professionals'.

Certainly as translated into the Education Standards Act (2001), there have been some signs that the government's intentions for what became the Teachers Council were along the managerial lines of what National had been proposing in their Green paper. First, teacher union representation was dropped and only reinstated after an intensive lobbying campaign. Second, the final composition of the Council gives only a guaranteed 6 teachers out of 11 with no requirement to represent teacher educators as is often the case elsewhere (Alcorn, 2004). Third, the Council is clearly an arm of government. It is structured as a Crown-owned entity and while teachers may be unlikely to disagree with the purpose and objectives of the Council as written into the legislation, the final objective is to 'exercise any other functions conferred on it by this Act, or by the Minister.'

The Education Standards Act (2001), an amendment to The Education Act (1989), requires the Teachers Council:

- To determine standards for teacher registration and the issue of practising certificates; and
- To establish and maintain standards for qualifications that lead to teacher registration.

The Teachers Council appears to have interpreted the latter requirement to mean developing a more immediate set of criteria for teaching qualifications than the Satisfactory Teaching Dimensions. It has signalled an intention to revise these and during 2005 began work on standards for graduating teachers, (i.e. those finishing initial teacher education programmes).

The new draft standards for graduating teachers have recently been released (NZTC, 2006a) and, as noted earlier, are generic rather than specified. Given the concerns of this paper this is a positive development, although there remains a risk that more detailed requirements could be put in place to operationalise the draft graduating standards.<sup>3</sup> Without a closer analysis of the processes of text

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<sup>3</sup> The introduction to the draft graduating standards notes that 'The documentation provided to the Teachers Council by the providers of teacher education programmes will outline and demonstrate how the standards



production involved it is impossible to know just how much the teacher associations and teacher educators represented on the graduating standards working party were able to genuinely represent teacher's interests. Nevertheless the evolution and nature of the Teachers Council as outlined above must raise a continuing concern about the extent to which teachers' interests will be represented in the future, especially as the history of involvement of teachers in education policymaking in neoliberal economies is not encouraging (Whitty, Power & Haplin, 1998; Levin, 2001). For example a change of government could easily reduce teacher input into standard-setting or stop it altogether.

Given this, the development of specified standards risks providing government with a powerful tool for controlling teachers. Gronn (2003, pp. 9-10) has written insightfully about this issue in relation to school leaders but the same arguments apply for other teachers as well. To begin with, he notes that the standard-setting process involves reifying some perspectives over others:

When standardisers define standards, they decide, in effect, which components of activities shall be visible and which shall be invisible. Their criteria for distinguishing between these visible and invisible dimensions may be explicit and publicly accessible or implicit and tacit. A significant effect of making some dimensions visible is to create a public agenda of admissibility. Thus 'every standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another' (Gronn, 2003, p. 9, quoting Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 156).

Second, Gronn argues that professional standards are 'solutions in search of problems' in that 'they prescribe anticipated, legitimated and programmed responses to societal and organisational possibilities yet to be realised' (p.10). However as solutions in search of problems, standards carry a number of

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will be met' (NZTC 2006b:4). Nevertheless the form in which the Teachers Council will require this documentation is not yet clear.

presumptions, for instance the presumption that standard setters rather than practitioners know better or know best, and the presumption that it is better to have uniformity of conduct amongst teachers rather than differences and variations in performance (see also section 4 of this paper).

Third, standards make teachers and teaching subject to predation from numerous interests. For any government agency that wants something from schools the easy answer becomes to 'pop in a standard' for schools/teachers to respond to regardless of how feasible that is, or the fragmenting and work-intensifying effects of having to work towards multiple, poorly co-ordinated goals.

### **3. Specified standards and the quality of teaching**

The proponents of specified standards make numerous claims about their practice value to teachers and teacher education. For instance Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2005) claim that 'standards-guided teacher education systems...are rated significantly more highly by graduate teachers' (p. 7), that they 'support the development of professional community in schools' and 'serve as a powerful vehicle for teachers' learning' (p. 7) and provide clearer, long-term goals for professional development (p.ii). Hattie (2004:4) argues that [specified] standards will enhance teachers' self-esteem. Professional standards are even thought to 'give teachers something about which to be collegial' (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2005, p. ii).

While it is argued that these effects will only be realised through standards which are 'well-written' and 'valid', it is important to recognise that even well-written specified standards will be deeply problematic. Like other managerial approaches specified standards can be expected to intensify teachers' workloads and hence reduce the sociability of teaching and be wasteful of pedagogic time, energy and resources. Like other forms of performativity specified standards will

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also encourage fabrication and strip authenticity out of the teaching process.

To begin with, inasmuch as specified standards for teachers are one reform amongst many (and this is how they should be seen), they will add to the intensification of teacher workloads caused by other managerial developments such as increased target-setting and performance management. An important loss associated with this is the social dimensions of teaching. In England Gewirtz (2002) found a decline in sociability between teachers because of time pressures and because teachers were meeting less about teaching matters and more often about management concerns. Intensification of teacher workloads also leads to a loss of the informal activities which lead to mutual learning and improved relationships between teachers and students and which can therefore be 'traded on' in delivering the formal curriculum. What happens less, for instance, is teachers sitting in a classroom during a lunch hour just 'shooting the breeze' or 'having a laugh' with a group of students, or running an after school club for students centred on some personal enthusiasm e.g. chess or painting. Intensification leads to a decline in such 'organic' extracurricular activity as teachers struggle to find the time to manage their formal workloads, let alone anything extra (Gewirtz, 2002).

Specified standards will also set up a compliance culture and an industry of verification, giving rise to the monitoring of conduct whether it really works or not:

The result is an incipient game of infinite regress in which groups of experts (governed by their own sets of standards?) are constantly checking up on other groups of experts who are required to provide 'auditable accounts'. (Gronn, 2003, p. 10, citing Power, 2001, p. 10).

The opportunity cost of diverting time and resources into this area instead of into more clearly educational and equity concerns is difficult to calculate but considerable. There is also evidence that all the time, effort and resources put

into specified standards may have little impact on student outcomes. For instance Grudnoff and colleagues (2005, p. 103) note that while teachers participating in the certification programme of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards in the U.S., 'probably the most systematic attempt to identify the elements of good teaching and to credential excellent teachers', believed the process improved their teaching and student learning, there was little evidence of this in terms of student achievement (Bond, Smith, Walker & Hattie, 2000).

Theorising specified standards as part of the technology of performativity helps to explain why they may not have much effect on student performance because it is clear that pressure to perform leads to impression management by way of fabrication. Ball (2001) illustrates many forms of fabrication which occur in the 'performing school' through the routine selection (or manipulation) of statistics and indicators, the stage management of events and the kinds of accounts that schools and individuals construct around themselves. Hence just as there is evidence of teachers teaching to the test/target/inspection/performance management criteria (e.g. Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), if they are under pressure to meet specified standards to which they are not genuinely committed, teachers can be expected to 'jump through the hoop' of compliance rather than authentically building them into their practice.

It is easy to see how specified standards could have a similar effect to previous examples of fabrication by New Zealand teachers. For instance research in the 1990s showed that ERO reviews led teachers to begin to create artefacts and ritualistic displays of their work along with unreal assessment records and teaching performances (Robertson, Dale, Thrupp, Vaughan & Jacka, 1997). Teachers started to internalise a new set of values and practices related to ERO's review requirements. For instance practices which could demonstrate 'value-added', even if elaborate and of dubious value, were adopted by teachers. They also began to spend more time on the production and maintenance of records and less time engaged in more creative, diverse and reflective teaching.

ERO's assessment requirements meant teacher practices became shaped by the touchstone 'This will be good for ERO!' even though teachers often did not believe these practices were in the best interests of students (Robertson et al. 1997).

Like other managerial interventions, specified standards strip authenticity out of the teaching and learning process. They distract, they get in the way, they constrain and clutter up the space for pedagogical action, broadly conceived. As Upsall (2001, p. 181) has put it, 'measuring teachers against a set of professional standards does not ensure a quality teaching profession and may in fact have the opposite effect'. This is because as Pring (2004) has noted

... there is something fundamentally wrong with the underlying conception of teaching. There is the failure to see the place of teaching in a genuine educational activity or practice. And therefore, whatever the benefits attached by the prevailing political understanding of teaching (and clearly there are some) there is at the same time an erosion of an educational tradition which both embodies and enriches what it means to live a fully and distinctively human life.

What specified standards will put at risk is the ability of teachers to respond directly to the learning needs of the students when their understanding of what is required doesn't 'fit' that implied by the specified standard. Good teaching will never be summed up in a set of specified standards because as Pring again explains it is an uncertain and contested activity which requires a cultural response from teachers rather than a technical response:

[T]eachers belong to a specific social and educational practice, coming to acquire the values and purposes inherent within it whilst at the same time contributing (through their constant reflection and critical appraisal) to its development. An 'educational practice' is necessarily a 'contested area',

embracing as it does, a range of values over which there is not, nor could there ever be, a complete agreement. Such a tradition both of what is worth learning and of how morally that learning should take place has in an important sense 'a life of its own'. It is something which cannot be deliberately created anew. Its development arises from critical appraisal from within the tradition as much as from external pressures and regulations. Teachers, seeing the demotivation of alienated young people, will question the value of *this* learning objective for *these* pupils. They will reassess what it means to educate this or that child, given the particular economic or social circumstances. They will draw upon the cultural traditions they have inherited to make sense of the situation and to help the learners to make sense. In other words teaching as part of an educational practice must include deliberation about the end or values of teaching, as much as it does deliberation about the means or techniques (Pring, 2004, pp. 78-79, his emphasis).

#### **4. The contextual limitations of specified standards**

The proponents of specified standards argue that it is possible to draw them up in ways which are detailed enough and context-specific enough to reflect the complexities of teaching:

The value of 'core' standards ....is that they provide an underpinning for the development of standards that are specific to subjects and/or particular years and kinds of schooling. Such standards 'drill down' into the many complex areas of teachers' knowledge and skills. (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2005, p. ii).

Yet the attempt to 'unpack' these complexities is fraught with difficulties. To begin with, it is much easier to reach agreement on generic standards than specified standards. As discussed by Grudnoff et al. (2005), one of the reasons generic

standards can work is precisely because they are generic enough to allow consensus but dissent tends to emerge as soon as the applied detail required by specified standards is required. They quote Moss and Schultz (1989, p. 683), 'The consensus that is achieved and made available for public review is at a level of generality that rises above any differences in perspective that might have been reflected in teaching vignettes.' Grudnoff and colleagues' solution to this is to involve practitioners in setting standards in order to better reflect the context-dependent nature of their practice.

Nevertheless while standards are supposed to be able to be applied in every set of circumstances which fall within the remit of a particular standard, they are also supposed to be decontextualised enough to be 'immune from the exigencies of localism' (Gronn, 2003, p. 9). The only way this contradiction can be overlooked is by assuming that the local and particular is not of great importance in teaching but this assumption is increasingly challenged by the concerns and findings of research.

A good illustration of the problem is raised by school composition research (Thrupp, 1999; Lupton, 2004; 2005). Thrupp's research on the impact of the socio-economic status (SES) composition of school intakes on school processes in New Zealand secondary schools illustrated how higher SES schools had less pressured guidance and discipline systems, with higher levels of student compliance and fewer very difficult guidance or discipline cases. Their senior management teams had fewer student, staff, marketing, and fund-raising problems, and more time to devote to planning and to monitoring performance. Day-to-day routines were more efficient and more easily accomplished. When it came to classroom instruction, the students in the higher SES schools were taught in teaching classes that were generally more compliant and more able to cope with difficult work. They used more demanding texts and other teaching resources and their teachers were more qualified and more motivated. Higher SES schools were also able to support more academic school programmes and

a wider range of extracurricular activities. Thrupp (1999) concluded that SES composition impacts on school processes in numerous ways so as to cumulatively boost the academic performance of schools in middle-class settings and drag it down in low socio-economic settings.

Lupton (2004; 2005) has extended Thrupp's analysis by illustrating that even amongst ostensibly similar SES schools there are other contextual differences which may cumulatively make a big difference to school processes. Lupton's study of four high poverty schools in England considered other pupil characteristics in addition to social class and parental income, for example, ethnicity, refugee status, looked after children, special educational needs. It also took into account area characteristics (e.g urban/rural, labour market structure and history, housing market) and school characteristics (e.g. market position compared to surrounding schools, LEA admissions policies, school type and history). The study illustrated that these various contextual differences lead to more and less favorable contexts for school improvement even in similarly high poverty areas: 'organizational impacts on schools in different kinds of disadvantaged areas can be significantly different' (Lupton, 2004, p.22).

The need to take greater account of the complexities of context is also becoming recognised in other research on schools and teaching, for instance school improvement research (Gray, 2001; Harris & Chapman, 2004) and school effectiveness research (Luyten, Visscher, & Witziers, 2005). For instance Harris and Chapman (2004, p. 429) argue that:

More locally owned and developed improvement strategies are needed that appreciate school context, best match prevailing conditions and build the internal capacity for development within the school. If the goal of raising performance in schools in difficulty is to be achieved, school improvement approaches that neglect to address the inherent diversity and variability across and within schools in the same broad category will be destined to



fail.

The problem with specified standards is that they are not adequately sourced from, nor grounded in, what counts as good teaching in the particular contexts that researchers are increasingly finding important. Examined in detail, each school's context, and thus its teachers' practices, must be different and not amenable to specified standards developed even for a group of schools. While it is certainly plausible that there is enough commonality in the practices adopted in schools with clusters of common contextual characteristics to provide a useful middle ground between wholly generic and wholly individualised versions of 'good practice', such models would not be robust enough for making judgements about performance.

Another key problem is that contextualised research is so rare at present that while Kleinhenz and Ingvarson argue that 'writing standards provides an opportunity for the profession to build stronger bridges between research and practice' (2005:i), this will be difficult because there are not yet the research findings across a range of settings which could be used to underpin the serious contextualisation of standards. It is hardly surprising then that official statements of teacher standards are seldom closely linked to research. Indeed as Grudnoff et al. (2005, p. 102) have put it, 'It seems as though proclamations of desirable standards of teaching and the characteristics of good teaching are not constrained by research evidence on what makes a difference with students.'

## **5. The importance of the New Zealand setting**

Although New Zealanders have sometimes been quite discriminating about what ideas they draw on from overseas, some policy importation will be difficult to avoid for a small nation like New Zealand which is usually a 'borrower' rather than a 'lender' of policy. One way to help pre-empt damaging policy-borrowing in the area of professional standards will be to tap into academic critiques of them

in other settings. Another is to have a clear understanding of what is particular about New Zealand as an educational policy setting. For there is no doubt that New Zealand is a distinctive arena for policy and much of what works internationally will not fit here and should not be forced to fit either (Thrupp, 2005a).

It is apparent that the academic advocacy of specified standards in New Zealand is embedded in a literature in which the political context has been largely stripped out. In Grace's (1995) terms, this literature takes a 'policy science' approach rather than a more searching 'policy scholarship' approach. In contrast, this paper has stressed that it is not possible to properly understand or evaluate the worth of specified standards for teachers without connecting them to critiques of the wider agenda of school reform they are a manifestation of. Yet neither Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2005) nor Hattie (2001, 2004) mention the relevant policy sociology literature, including important critiques of standards informed by this wider understanding (especially Gronn, 2003). Where critical concerns are mentioned they are often brushed aside, for instance:

Some people have opposed the idea of standards for teaching because of concerns that they could be used against teachers, especially when they fail to fully express the nature of teachers' work. Such standards, it has been claimed, could 'de-skill' teachers and 'intensify' their work. To avoid a situation where 'professionalism under the guise of standards becomes a tool for employers demanding more of teachers' (Sachs, 2003, p. 184), stakeholders argue strongly that standards should be 'owned' by the teaching profession, and not by employers. While standards aim to provide a consensus about good teaching practice, they need not prescribe or 'standardize' the means by which the standards are brought to life in practice. Teachers who have widely varying teaching 'styles' and who exhibit quite different behaviours in the classroom can achieve the same set of standards. Well-written standards place emphasis on what students

would be doing and learning, as a result of the conditions for learning that a teacher has established in their classrooms. They do not prescribe one way of teaching (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2005, pp. 6-7).

Turning to the importance of New Zealand's distinctiveness as an educational policy setting, it is not clear that specified standards would lead to improvements in the calibre of teaching in New Zealand. An initial reason for this is simply that there is no evidence of a crisis of teacher quality which would warrant the introduction of specified standards given the expense. Indeed Grudnoff and colleagues (2005) point out that international studies such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) show the achievement of New Zealand students to be broadly comparable and sometimes better than those in England where there are statutory standards. Middleton and May (1997) have shown that historically New Zealand teachers have been acculturated into a distinctively child-centred professional culture. Research on New Zealand primary teachers by Locke, Vulliamy, Webb, and Hill (2005) illustrates that far from 'provider-capture', altruistic concerns for the welfare of children remain the profession's defining quality.

The best argument for a decline in the calibre of New Zealand teacher workforce would be the proliferation of teacher education providers under the market model of the last decade. Prior to 1989 initial teacher education was almost entirely restricted to six colleges of education but by 2004 there were 31 providers and 156 different programmes of initial teacher education. The main reason for this proliferation was that in 1996, in response to a teacher shortage and interest from the polytechnic sector wanting to enter the initial teacher education market, the Ministry of Education provided incentives and 'persuasion' for potential new 'providers' to offer teaching qualifications (Jesson, 1997). The TRB was put under political pressure to approve many new programmes in a very short time

frame and the normal quality assurance processes in tertiary institutions were 'dispensed with or subverted in order to meet deadlines' (Jesson, 1997, p. 350).

Although the characteristics of applicants to teaching have always been affected by labour market trends, it would hardly be surprising if these developments have had long-term effects on the characteristics of applicants to teaching and hence affected the calibre of teaching. Moreover Kane et al. (2005) note that proliferation has also caused competition between institutions for practicum placements and associate teachers. Yet to respond by developing a regime of specified standards for teachers would simply be to follow up one bad policy with another. This is because if proliferation has led to a decline in the calibre of applicants being accepted, or in the quality of their preparation, the problem would be better addressed through professional development which can actually inform and develop teachers' practice rather than professional standards which specify the required outcomes and assume teachers have the ability to respond.

Applied to the New Zealand policy context, specified standards would also be in tension with the thrust of other recent education policy, especially Ministry of Education initiatives designed to promote collaboration and professional dialogue. These include, for instance, the Best Evidence Syntheses, school-based curriculum development, 'Extending High Standards Across Schools' and the large professional development projects in numeracy and literacy. By focussing on performative concerns rather than professional dialogue, specified standards would work against the professional culture that these initiatives are intended to develop and in this respect be not just unhelpful but counterproductive.

The impact of specified standards could also be expected to be influenced by the way managerialism and performativity play out in the New Zealand context (Thrupp, 2005a; 2005b). For instance it is clear that specified standards for teachers could have a particular potency in New Zealand education policy

because of the central role the current Labour government gives to teacher quality in explaining levels of student achievement. As O'Neill (2005, p. 119), has put it

... the Fifth Labour Government has actively promoted the idea that in an era of supposedly universal access and participation in education, structural change is unnecessary because the quality of teaching is the key variable in schooling (ie background *is not* a barrier to achievement). Accordingly when students fail to achieve, the prototypical classroom teacher becomes the scapegoat. Teacher 'responsibility' in this discourse is Janus-faced: it can at the same time be read both positively (i.e. responsibility as a cornerstone of a new pedagogical professionalism) and negatively (i.e. lack of teacher responsibility as the only explanatory variable whenever children 'fail' to achieve). In this ideal, Labour is attempting simultaneously to secure the active support of the teaching workforce as partner of the state and to persuade the wider electorate that it is the watchdog of educational standards.

Additionally Locke et al. (2005) suggest, on the basis of their research, that New Zealand primary teachers are often likely to accept extrinsic forms of accountability if they are 'consonant with a discourse of intrinsic or professional accountability.' This is related to the altruism noted earlier since:

If the good of the child is the undisputed end of teaching ... a teacher who is convinced that the authoritative other (the State, the subject adviser, the university scholar, the local community) knows best how to define this good is more likely to sacrifice autonomy out of deference to the expertise of the other and that other's judgement. (p. 564)

In combination these features suggest that professional standards could easily become overemphasised in the New Zealand setting, intensifying the risks of

unquestioning compliance, or of fabrication, neither of which would promote authentic teaching and learning in New Zealand schools.

Finally, the earlier points about the importance of contexts and lack of suitably contextualised research will have great salience in a small but diverse country like New Zealand. It would be necessary to develop specified standards for numerous teaching contexts including different age groups and subject areas within the primary and secondary sectors, schools and classrooms marked by widely varying socioeconomic, ethnic and special needs compositions, and different provision types including Maori-medium settings. This would be an enormous task and a poor use of energies for a small and already stretched teaching workforce and an even smaller population of education researchers.

## **Conclusion**

The reality is that any development of specified standards would not so much empower New Zealand teachers as limit and constrain them. Professional standards will work best when they are generic standards, written and understood to represent broad guidance and direction in relation to teachers' practices and aspirations. Anything more detailed would be to underestimate the importance of local context and pedagogical autonomy, anything higher stakes would be to risk the costs of performativity.

It is also clear that generic standards will continue to suffice for the broad registration and renewal purposes required by the Teachers Council. The legislation does not require the development of specified standards for higher-stakes purposes and it would not be beneficial to move in this direction. Rather the Teachers Council should proceed as it has for the draft Standards for Graduating Teachers, revising the Satisfactory Teaching Dimensions as generic standards, and working closely with teachers as it does so.

Generic standards will also best support an environment where teachers are able to work together as critical friends in the context of peer appraisal. As Upsall (2001) has noted: 'A peer appraisal scheme that enables reflection, self analysis and the identification of areas of personal development is essential. However this could only succeed if teachers were assured that the information would not be used 'against' them' (p. 179).

Programmes of excellent, critical, professional development to sustain and inform the existing professional culture of teachers would be a much more worthwhile approach to improving the quality of teaching in New Zealand than a regime of specified standards. However as professional development can be another vehicle for the promotion of neo-liberal policies and discourses, professional development needs to include critical perspectives and be teacher led:

Teachers need to be involved in the design of their own professional development, which needs to be personally relevant and to reflect the principles of adult learning. These requirements can be met by ensuring teacher input into professional development planning, having more specific requirements...as well as more meaningful evaluation of current programmes. (Thornton, 2002, p. 89).

In Codd's (1994) terms, all of the above is to argue for a 'professional-contextualist' rather than a 'technocratic-reductionist' approach. It reflects a perspective centred on virtue ethics which Hazeldine (1998, p. 205) describes as being 'about good people behaving well, about taking care to appoint honourable and competent personnel, and then trusting them to get on with the job.' For instance, putting faith in the provision of good professional development assumes that teachers genuinely want to improve their practice. Yet it is not just a belief in the organic professionalism of teachers which should draw policymakers to a higher trust approach than specified standards. Rather it is a sensible response to the paradox that the more managerial and performative

pressure is placed on teachers, the less authentic their teaching will become. For this reason specified standards will be deeply counterproductive and there is no getting around the problem.

To date, New Zealand has avoided some of the costs of more performative education systems such as those in England and the U.S., for instance through the use of NEMP, the National Educational Monitoring Project, rather than national testing. It is to be hoped that New Zealand policymakers continue to have the confidence to take a different approach. They will achieve much more by taking a high-trust, collaborative approach with teachers than trying to steer them from a distance through specified standards.

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