

TESTING TEACHERS IN TRYING TIMES

Fran Cosgrove (Victorian Institute of Teaching fran.cosgrove@vit.vic.edu.au)

Abstract:

National Partnerships agreed to and supported by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognise the importance of quality teaching in achieving positive educational outcomes for children. In scrutinising the quality of teaching, focus has moved to the assessment of teacher effectiveness. The Victorian Institute of Teaching undertakes an assessment of beginning teachers that seeks assurance of competence against standards of professional practice. The recently released *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning* undertaken by the Education and Training Committee of the Parliament of Victoria suggests that the Institute needs to adopt a more rigorous process to assess beginning teachers against the standards and this should include the use of external assessment.

Within the background of the national agenda, this paper explores the premise that processes used by the Institute require greater external assessment to strengthen their validity. It evaluates the current school-based recommendation process used by the Victorian Institute of Teaching to determine whether provisionally registered teachers meet standards of professional practice. It also analyses external assessment of teacher practice used in other Australian states and overseas in relation to the Victorian model for provisionally registered teachers. Of particular focus will be the importance of both process and outcome in a regulatory environment and how assessment of teacher performance supports and promotes learning.

Current context

The establishment of standards-based regulatory processes for teachers has been a relatively new phenomenon in Australia. Even so, state politicians have taken this up with alacrity to the extent that all jurisdictions now have teacher registration or accreditation authorities (except the Australian Capital Territory, which is in the process of developing theirs). To some extent this has been a response to the proliferation of accountability regimes that have become part of education and teacher life. They have also been developed to recognise teaching as a profession and bring it in line with other professions that have long histories of public accountability. This is not a bad thing for teachers who have traditionally met accountabilities at a local level by reporting to their schools, students and the parents of their students. Teacher registration and accreditation pushes these accountabilities into the public domain. Although teachers have felt this is an area where they are not always well-regarded, public accountability should have the effect of better informing the community about the work of teachers and bring respect for their expert knowledge and practice.

The process for provisionally registered teachers to meet standards in Victoria

The Victorian Institute of Teaching has been assessing provisionally registered teachers (PRTs) against standards of professional practice for full registration since 2004. An evidence-based process for teachers to demonstrate their practice against the standards was developed and trialled extensively in 2003 and the process has been subsequently reviewed and revised each year in response to feedback from PRTs and their mentors and independent evaluations. This process is designed to not just assess teacher competence against professional standards but also support the development of strong practice at the beginning of a teacher's career. Directed reflection on teaching and learning and opportunities to work with more experienced colleagues are Institute requirements within the evidence-based process and this means that the schools where provisionally registered teachers are working become partners in the process. The Institute has taken this one step further by entering into agreements with the government and catholic school sectors that the process for provisionally registered teachers to meet the standards is underpinned by strong induction with a specific focus on mentoring within their schools. There has also been a positive response to this from the independent schools sector.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) works with the Institute to develop support materials and deliver a two-day course to train mentors, which is open to teachers from all sectors. To date, over 7,000 mentors have been trained. Training provides mentors with an understanding of effective strategies for mentoring and ensures that they know the process required for PRTs to become fully registered and their role in this. Professional support for beginning teachers, the emergence of successful practice in their first years of teaching and articulation of the evidence to meet the standards for full registration become intertwined through this model. Using standards as the basis for mentoring and school support allows PRTs to understand the importance of evaluation of and reflection on their teaching practice in relation to student learning, so the core business of being a teacher is never lost in the myriad of things a teacher does as an employee. The standards also provide the language for collegial conversations and the focus for teacher learning and improvement. This model has been in place for six years and has become an important part of the structure and yearly planning of schools. Schools acknowledge that new teachers require professional support and have made a commitment to mentoring to the extent that 94-99% of PRTs report that a school colleague has mentored them in the time leading up to their application for full registration.

Assessment of provisionally registered teachers

Teacher knowledge can never be disassociated from their practice and standards for teachers who are newly registered focus strongly on the transference of knowledge gained during tertiary study into classroom practice. The gathering of evidence of practice to meet the standards happens in a school context and much of the support offered to PRTs comes from their schools and colleagues in their schools. The Institute uses the school where the teacher has gathered evidence of their practice to make an assessment of the evidence against the standards of professional practice for full registration. The school convenes a panel of peers, including the principal, to assess the evidence and makes a recommendation to the Institute. This recommendation report becomes part of the process to apply for full registration. While the school recommendation is central to the process of assessment it is the Institute that grants full registration and takes responsibility for that judgement. Consequently quality assurance measures, including an audit of 10% of applications for full registration, become important for the Institute to ensure that there is consistency and equity across school assessments.

It has been suggested by the Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee that the structure developed by the Institute to assess teacher competence against professional standards has been compromised because of the ‘conflation of mentoring, support and assessment functions in the employing school.’¹ The submission of documented evidence of practice against professional standards to an external assessor is proposed as a model that provides ‘rigour and objectivity to the process’². They recommend: That the Victorian Government further support the Supporting Provisionally Registered Teachers Program, by: ...

- strengthening assessment processes for provisionally registered teachers, including the possible involvement of an external assessor.³

Perhaps the best way to judge whether external assessment will enhance the rigour of the model currently being used by the Victorian Institute of Teaching is to investigate examples of this in other jurisdictions. The term ‘rigour’ is difficult to investigate, meaning many things to many people, but in this case it is construed to mean the validity of the process to identify that teachers meet professional standards. Interestingly, research indicates that there are few models of external assessment occurring in the profession of teaching although this is the norm for other professions. The *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning* references the assessment and accreditation model developed by the New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSW Institute) as an exemplar of best practice where “beginning teachers applying for Accreditation of Professional Competence...must submit documented evidence of their practice against professional standards to an external (rather than school-based) assessor.”⁴ The comparability of the process developed in NSW with that used by the Institute in Victoria is evident making it a good model for comparison. In terms of other examples of external assessment of teacher practice the most established and well known is that used by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This process, like that in NSW, is used for certification rather than registration and is a voluntary assessment of highly accomplished teachers against National Board Standards. Despite these differences in use and application investigation of the assessment processes, which are considered to be rigorous, fair and consistent in both models is worthwhile.

¹ Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning*, 2009, Victorian Government Printer, Victoria, page 23

² Ibid, Page 23

³ Ibid, Page 46

⁴ Ibid, Page 23

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards processes

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established in the United States in a climate of deregulation and concern about the quality of teaching. The Board's detailed and diverse assessment methods were considered to be equivalent to those undertaken by members of highly regarded professions such as doctors, architects and engineers⁵ The founding president, James Kelly viewed the certification process as one "in which teachers would communicate about practice and work collectively and collaboratively"⁶ and that "would contribute significantly to improving the quality of teaching, and enhancing the status—and the attractiveness—of teaching as a career."⁷ These aspirations to build a profession are also central to the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching and such intent should not be lost when investigating the assessment processes used by either authority.

The NBPTS process for certification requires teachers to produce a portfolio of at least four entries, three of which must be classroom based and including at least two video recordings of their practice. Teachers develop commentaries describing, analysing and reflecting upon their practice using the National Board Standards. In addition teachers nominate their subject area specialization from twenty-five and are assessed on content knowledge, which is administered at a computer based assessment centre.⁸

While the NBPTS process requires a significantly greater level of documentation, detail and analysis than is required for Victorian teachers seeking full registration, the assessment processes are similar. Provisionally registered teachers in Victoria are required to select one of three options to gather evidence of their practice against standards of professional practice. Each option requires documentation of teacher practice as it occurs in the classroom, the analysis of student work in relation to identified goals and the reflection on knowledge and practice and areas for future learning. Teachers are required to work in their classroom with a more experienced teacher, usually their mentor, who offers collegial support and is able to witness their practice. They also visit the classrooms of experienced teachers and engage in professional discussion and feedback. Mentors are trained to provide structured professional support as colleagues, rather than ad hoc buddying. Provisionally registered teachers must provide a minimum of 3 collegial classroom activities, an analysis of teaching and learning, which relates to curriculum they have taught and a commentary on professional activities to be assessed for full registration.

Teachers who are granted provisional registration in Victoria are usually recent graduates from pre-service teacher training courses that have been approved for accreditation by the Institute. The Institute Guidelines for approval require clear evidence of content knowledge in the course and teachers will only be registered if they have completed four years of tertiary education with one year of approved teacher training. These requirements for registration provide assurance that PRTs are equipped with current content and pedagogical knowledge and it is unlikely that any external assessment to test this knowledge on application for full registration, such as that used in the NBPTS process, would do little more than annoy the tertiary institutions that have recently assessed and graduated these teachers. Therefore, the focus for considering this model rests with the portfolio of teacher practice that is developed for assessment.

⁵ Centre for Teaching Quality, *Measuring What Matters The Effects of National Board Certification on Advanced 21st Century Teaching and Learning*, July 2008 Retrieved 30 October 2009 from <http://www.teachingquality.org/legacy/MeasuringWhatMatters.pdf>

⁶ Koppich, J.E., Humphrey, D.C., & Hough, H.J. (2007), *Making use of what teachers know and can do: Policy, practice and national board certification*. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 15(7) Retrieved 18 November 2009 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v15n7/v15n7.pdf>, Page 8

⁷ Ibid, Page 8

⁸ National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, *2009 Guide to National Board Certification* Retrieved from : www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/nbpts.pdf

Evaluating the validity of the NBPTS assessment

A number of research studies have been undertaken in recent years to determine the validity of the NBPTS process in assessing highly accomplished teachers. Many have involved the comparison of NBPTS certified teachers with non-certified teachers using the plethora of student data from standardized tests that is currently available in the United States. Results from these studies are varied although usually positive and there has been criticism that the use of standardized test scores is limiting. Suggestions are that multiple and diverse measures used in evaluation would be more effective to measure teacher quality.⁹ With that caution, this paper briefly considers two studies by respected researchers. Bond, Smith, Baker and Hattie¹⁰ undertook a large-scale quantitative investigation to assess to what extent teachers who had achieved certification exhibited the attributes of expert teaching to a measurably greater degree than their non-certified counterparts. Unlike other studies the attributes of expert teaching were developed from a scan of the research literature rather than the National Board Standards, which ensured that the results weren't skewed in favour of certified teachers. Results indicated "in all single comparisons between the National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) and Non-National Board Certified teachers on the dimensions of teaching excellence, NBCTs scored higher and 11 of the 13 comparisons were highly statistically significant."¹¹ The size of this study and extensive approach to the measurement of validity suggest that the scoring process used by the NBPTS is accurate in identifying highly accomplished teachers.

A further study by Goldhaber and Anthony¹² resulted in similar results. They linked NBPTS records to state teacher records and student level administration records from North Carolina. The large number of NBPTS certified teachers in North Carolina supported the investigation with 9,000 students taught by certified teachers. The findings indicated that certified teachers exceeded non-certified teachers by 4% in reading and 5% in maths.¹³ Interestingly, the study found that teachers who will be certified in the future (Future NBCT) are more effective prior to certification, although the study affirms that certified teachers are more effective than non-certified applicants. The discrepancy between teachers who have gained certification and those who are yet to be certified appears to support the theory that the time and focus required to complete the NBPTS assessment process impacts on teacher effectiveness.

This is significant when considering such an assessment process for PRTs in Victoria. In the first years of the evidence-based process there was criticism of the time required to document evidence and the perception from some mentors that this process took teachers away from their day-to-day work. The Institute worked tirelessly to modify the process to ensure that all documentation of practice required from teachers is valid and valuable. Adding to the requirements for documentation to satisfy a more comprehensive assessment process could very well result in the focus for teachers being the documentation rather than the development of practice. Recent evaluation of this aspect of the current process indicates that 52% of 2008 PRTs provided more documentation than was required by the Institute.

⁹ Centre for Teaching Quality, July 2008, *Measuring What Matters The Effects of National Board Certification on Advanced 21st Century Teaching and Learning*, Retrieved 30 October 2009 from <http://www.teachingquality.org/legacy/MeasuringWhatMatters.pdf>, page 17

¹⁰ Bond, L., Smith, T., Baker, W.K., & Hattie, J. A.,(2000, September). *The certification system of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A construct and consequential validity study*, Retrieved 18 November 2009 from: http://www.nbpts.org/UserFiles/File/validity_1_-_UNC_Greeborsbo_D_-_Bond.pdf

¹¹ Ibid, page 139

¹² Goldhaber, D. & Anthony, E. (2004). *Can teacher quality be effectively assessed?* Retrieved 2 November 2009 from <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/>

¹³ Ibid, page 14

However an interrogation of reasons for this indicated that 92% of PRTs had a personal desire to do a good job and 77% found it a valuable reflective process.¹⁴ Mentors are often aware of the pressure some PRTs put themselves under when compiling their evidence of professional practice and can advise on the appropriate amount and form of documentation. This is much easier to ensure when all processes are based in the school. External assessment can exacerbate the pressure to perform for unknown assessors and this can create unnecessary anxiety for teachers beginning their career.

Cost benefit of external assessment using the NBPTS model

The NBPTS assessment process is undoubtedly comprehensive and research indicates that generally the process of assessment is valid in measuring accomplishment in teachers. Teachers are provided with information about the scoring process against the National Board Standards and assessors are peers who have undertaken intensive training. The NBPTS conducts analysis of the level of assessor reliability and teachers are scored by two independent assessors.¹⁵ Teachers can access a score validation service and there is a process for appeals. Of course, this comes at a price and teachers pay US\$2,500 to apply for NBPTS certification, which raises the issue of resourcing when considering changes to the assessment process for Victorian provisionally registered teachers.

To implement even a streamlined version of the NBPTS assessment process the cost to the Institute would be considerable and this needs to be balanced with the benefit derived from such a change. Certainly, the Institute already conducts detailed training of mentors in evaluating evidence against the standards. This is implemented through the presence of a mentor on the school assessment panel but potentially these mentors could be used to assess evidence off-site or at schools other than their own and thus include greater external assessment within the process. An off-site facility would mean taking teachers out of their schools and require a replacement for their classes. Out of hours work that would not cost the school would require some compensation from the Institute to the teachers making the assessment. To ask teachers to pay to apply for full registration is not an option because this is a mandated requirement and there is no provision for such fees in the Institute legislation. Furthermore this is not something the Institute would consider imposing upon the newest members of the profession. So, at the very least, this would necessitate the Institute abandoning its support program of after schools seminars for provisionally registered teachers in 30 locations across the state and the reduction of support materials for teachers undertaking the evidence-based process to pay for the new assessment process. The use of mentors in schools other than their own as part of the recommendation process has the potential to provide a measure of moderation and increased objectivity in the assessment of evidence. However, schools would have to bear the cost of teachers being away from their classes and schools in remote areas may struggle to meet this requirement.

The question is whether the increased validity of the process is worth the corresponding reduction of support for PRTs. On balance, the loss of contact with PRTs and fewer support materials is unlikely to be compensated by a corresponding increase in the validity of the assessment process currently in use.

The accreditation of teachers in New South Wales

The NSW Institute of Teachers requires mandatory accreditation of new scheme teachers at the level of professional competence. The process is similar to the provisional to full process required of teachers in

¹⁴ Richardson, E., 2009, *Victorian Institute of Teaching Supporting Provisionally Registered Teachers: 2008 Program Evaluation* Retrieved from: http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/files/documents/1847_Supporting-PRTs-2008-program-evaluation.pdf

¹⁵ National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, *2009 Guide to National Board Certification* Retrieved 3 November from www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/nbpts.pdf

Victoria, with teachers compiling evidence of their practice using the Framework of Professional Standards for Teachers. However, the structure of support and assessment is different in that the authority to assess the competence of these teachers is assigned to Teacher Assessment Authorities (TAA). The School Education Director for government schools, the Diocesan Director in catholic schools and the Head of an independent school become the TAAs. “The Institute advises and assists Teacher Accreditation Authorities to accredit teachers as well as monitoring the accreditation process across all schools.”¹⁶ The process is school-based and the TAA identifies a teacher or number of teachers responsible for managing the new scheme teacher’s accreditation and a supervising teacher is assigned “who can engage colleagues in discussion and reflection about effective teaching and learning”¹⁷ This is comparable with mentor support in Victorian schools. Of course, it’s unlikely that the School Education Director or a Diocesan Director would actually undertake the selection of these teachers and this is most probably devolved to school principals, which is where the responsibility rests for the selection of mentors for Victorian PRTs. Assessment of whether the teacher meets the standards, recording of the accreditation of new scheme teachers and the development of a report on the teacher are also responsibilities of the TAA that are likely to be devolved to a school and regional level.

The NSW Institute works to oversee rather than grant accreditation and they do this through the use of external assessors. The external assessors are experienced teachers who apply for the position for a minimum of two years and are provided with briefing sessions to support their capacity to make consistent judgements. External assessors do not observe the applicant’s teaching directly but review and comment on the evidence contained within the accreditation report provided by the Teacher Accreditation Authority. This review is submitted to the NSW Institute. The TAA must be sent a copy of the external assessor’s conclusions and is advised to consider the advice of the external assessor as formative in developing consistent judgements. Where the recommendation of the external assessor varies from the TAA, the decision of the TAA is final.¹⁸ As the NSW Institute puts it; “Ultimately, the decision to accredit against the standards must rely on the professional judgement of the teachers involved in the accreditation process. Furthermore, the decision to accredit should be based on an accumulation of a range of evidence collected over a period of time.”¹⁹

Evaluation of external assessors in the Victorian context

When considering the use of external assessors in the NSW model it’s important to draw a distinction between assessment and quality assurance. The NSW Institute external assessors do not assess the practice of teachers applying for accreditation, it is the TAA who does that. The external assessors assure the quality of the process undertaken by the TAAs by seeking consistency in judgement and providing feedback to improve the quality of judgement. This is important to ensure the process is reliable and equitable across all school sectors. However, with the external assessor at arms’ length from the school where the teacher collects their evidence and the process to determine whether the standards have been met, their role is not about the validity of the actual assessment of teacher competence but about whether everyone is doing it consistently.

It can be argued that the Victorian model has similar assessment and quality assurance processes to those in NSW. Teachers are supported in their schools to develop evidence and schools make a

¹⁶ NSW Institute of Teachers, *Accreditation–Policies and Manual* Retrieved on 19 November from <http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/Accreditation%20at%20Professional%20Competence.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

recommendation, which is used by the Institute to make an assessment for the grant of full registration. The Institute provides feedback to school principals and ensures consistency through the audit of at least 10% of teachers applying for full registration. These teachers provide their evidence to the Institute and it is independently assessed. External assessors in NSW scrutinise all accreditation reports and this provides for greater consistency than a random sampling of evidence from teachers. However, the Institute audit is conducted on 250 teachers by as few as two experienced evaluators who have undertaken this role since 2003. This minimises any discrepancy in judgement that may occur between a larger number of external assessors who may only stay in the role for two years.

Conclusion

To all effects and purposes, it appears that the use of external assessors in the NSW Institute process to accredit teachers at professional competence is little different from the audit process conducted by the Victorian Institute of Teaching. Certainly, the expansion of the audit process would strengthen the measurement of consistency of implementation of the process across schools but it is unlikely that anything would be added to the assessment by adopting the NSW process. The assessment used by the NBPTS is far more independent of schools although teachers with a little as three years experience, a bachelor's degree and a valid teaching licence can apply to become an assessor in this process. The extensive written and electronic documentation of teacher evidence must also ensure greater validity of assessment because there are more artifacts of practice to consider. In comparison, the Victorian process requires documentation and artifacts of practice to a lesser degree. Consequently, the process relies on the interaction with school colleagues in the development of evidence and situates the assessment in the school where the students, curriculum and context is known. To move the Victorian process to an NBPTS type assessment it would be necessary to demand more expansive evidence that could be assessed away from the school. As argued earlier there would be an added and prohibitive cost burden to this type of assessment.

Ultimately, it comes down to purpose. The granting of full registration is a high stakes process for provisionally registered teachers where they are judged by the profession to be proficient practitioners and this is essential for public confidence in the profession. Public confidence will only occur when the performance of the teacher matches the assessment made by the Institute. Considering the alternative models of assessment proposed, it appears that the current assessment process in Victoria is adequate. Certainly, there are teachers who do not meet the standards or who take longer than some to meet the standards but generally most standards are attainable by provisionally registered teachers within the prescribed two years, as would be expected. Clear communication about the level of evidence required to meet the standards for full registration and a transparent and objective assessment process using a detailed recommendation report ensures that schools are able to make consistent judgements about teacher practice. When asked to comment, 77% of the 2008 cohort of PRTs, 88% of their mentors and 92% of their principals felt that the process reflected authentic aspects of the provisionally registered teachers work as teachers and that the standards were a valid and valuable way of assessing professional knowledge.²⁰

²⁰ Richardson, E., 2009, *Victorian Institute of Teaching Supporting Provisionally Registered Teachers: 2008 Program Evaluation* Retrieved from: http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/files/documents/1847_Supporting-PRTs-2008-program-evaluation.pdf

It is in the other purpose of the provisional to full registration process in Victoria where the real value lies. The Institute has used regulatory process to drive reform in the induction and mentoring of teachers new to the profession. Through supported entry at a profession and school level, teachers are able to develop their knowledge and practice to attain the standards of professional practice. The quality of the evidence produced becomes something that is certain when the support for and learning of the PRT interact well. To emphasise the assessment of the evidence to the detriment of the support for learning would be to devalue the whole process. While a valid form of assessment is necessary, it should not require a notion of rigour that moves away from also allowing a focus on formative learning for teachers that is situated in the school where they teach. Ultimately, balance is required in any process to assess teachers, where both public reassurance and professional growth and collegiality can be achieved.

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