



Evidence for no-one: Standards, accreditation, and transformed teaching work



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The conception of evidence in relation to teachers' work requires expansion.
- Teachers are able to select and demonstrate evidence of transformed teaching work.
- Evidence of transformed teaching is different in nature to evidence for accountability purposes.
- Professional teaching standards did not inform teachers' learning or evidence.

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between professional teaching standards and the evidence that they have been met and/or maintained is an issue of ongoing interest internationally. This study employed a dialogic analysis of research conversations and institutional ethnography to trace the social relationships that support teachers' learning in ways that they considered had transformed their practice. Some examples are used to illustrate how the nature of evidence of transformed teaching work offered by teachers differed from the evidence they had produced for the purposes of accreditation against professional standards.

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1. Introduction

Nicole: ... that was a huge ordeal for me - just to put together the pieces of evidence that you needed to put together. To be able to learn the language of the professional standards-professional teaching standards, all very unfamiliar things, to know what was appropriate evidence ... So you know it went down from things like having to do a 50-page document to something that needed to fit inside a plastic sleeve ... What really is evidence? ... It consumed a lot of hours for me.

The notion of 'evidence' is inextricably linked to accountability agendas. For many teachers, like Nicole, the question: "What really is evidence?" is underpinned by further questions related to the purpose and intended audience for such evidence. While resisting

the dominant logic of evidence production for the purposes of ensuring 'quality', I intend to explore a number of key ways in which the provision of 'evidence' for the purposes of accreditation¹ against professional standards differs from teachers selecting 'evidence' in order to demonstrate that their professional learning has transformed their teaching work.

Successive Australian governments have followed close behind the rest of the Western world, particularly the USA, Canada and the UK, in instituting an educational agenda influenced by neoliberal priorities related to standardisation, testing and accountability. Or,

¹ At the time of this study, only teachers who had joined the teaching profession since 2004 or were returning to teaching after a break were required to be accredited against professional teaching standards (AITSL, 2012a) for the purposes of teacher registration. From 2018, all Australian teachers will be required to be accredited at the level of 'proficient'. They will maintain such accreditation through five yearly cycles of evidence production (AITSL, 2012c) resulting from their professional learning.

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as Cochrane-Smith identifies this agenda, “market-based approaches to educational reform” (2004, p. 194). The study reported on here is temporally situated when, for the first time in the history of Australian teachers’ working lives, they are working with both a national curriculum and a set of national professional standards which bring with them expectations of transformed teaching, expressed through notions of ‘quality’ and ‘21st century learning’. The centralised, managerial agenda, particularly as it relates to professional standards, creates a view of teacher learning as an activity undertaken by individualised teachers and heavily reliant on standards-accredited programs of professional development. An underlying assumption of such agendas is that professional development opportunities equate to professional learning that results in changed teaching practices. Institutional ethnography (IE) was employed in this study in order to trace not only the social relationships that supported teachers’ professional learning but also to reveal the governing influence of ‘boss texts’, including national professional standards and a national curriculum, on teachers’ work and learning ‘at the coal face’ (Griffith & Smith, 2014). These boss texts seek to govern teachers work from afar, shaping teacher’s work and their learning about that work in ways that can be regulated by accrediting agencies. IE begins with teacher’s ‘actual doings’ (Smith, 2005) as they describe them and seeks to trace these doings to the social and textual relationships that support and inhibit them. In this way, IE is able to acknowledge professional learning as a situated practice.

1.1. Evidence of teacher learning

In relation to ‘evidence’ of the impact of teacher professional learning on teacher performance, several major reviews of research literature concerned with teacher learning (Borko, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008) were selected because they consider teacher professional learning from a social and situated perspective, an epistemology consistent with my study. These reviews find that the evidence that professional learning opportunities make a difference to either teacher’s work or student learning outcomes is not clearly explicated. Nor is the role of so-called standards-based reforms, including professional standards, accreditation, and maintenance of accreditation, linked to empirical evidence of either teacher learning or the process of transforming teaching work (Fishman, Marx, Best, & Revital, 2003). Most frequently omitted from such research is first, the ‘causal explanation’ of how, if at all, teacher learning occurs as a result of professional learning opportunities, and second, the evidence that such learning transforms practice (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Much of the research related to teacher professional learning has focused on identification of characteristics of learning experiences that are thought to be effective in supporting teacher learning (Avalos, 2011; Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Desimone, 2009; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999). It is worth noting here, as Desimone (2009) points out, “We do not have sufficient evidence to indicate which features of professional development are effective for eliciting improvements in student learning” (p. 183). The assumption that teacher learning impacts on student learning at all is largely underpinned, according to Opfer and Pedder (2011, p. 384) by research conducted in 1989 which found that students performed better if their teachers had participated in an “80-h cognitively guided instruction” rather than a “4-h professional development program”.

The extensive, systematic review of extant literature (up to and including 2007) conducted by Opfer and Pedder (2011) for the *Training and Development Agency for Schools in England*, and cited

above, was particularly interested in the “impact that learning experiences have on their [teachers’] knowledge and changes in classroom practice” (p. 376). This review employed a complexity theory approach to analysis in order that it might examine a number of different strands of literature on teacher professional learning to explain how different systems intersect and interact in order to produce teacher learning. The review was concerned with understanding “under what conditions, why and how teachers learn” (p. 378). They claim that the bulk of such research is underpinned by a flawed epistemological assumption that teacher’s learning follows directly from frequent implementation of particular types of professional development activities. For the studies included in this review much of the evidence of teacher change associated with teacher learning, aside from ‘satisfaction’ surveys, is gathered from teachers’ reports of their changes in factors associated with learning; knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, emotions or behaviour. As Meirink, Meijer, and Verloop (2007) have observed, such forms of self-reporting may distort results of associated change in practice given that teachers may not be aware that their practice has changed in response to their learning. Further, most of the research reviewed views teacher learning as both a “serial and additive” process (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 378), more related to sequence of activities and duration, as opposed to a cyclic process. They call this a ‘product-process’ approach resulting from simplistic constructs of teacher learning that “fail to consider how learning is embedded in professional lives and working conditions” (p. 376). It is their opinion that many large scale reviews of literature related to teacher professional learning also fail to account for those teachers who: undertake professional learning activity “with all the characteristics of effectiveness and yet learning or change does not occur”; and “reports that some teachers learn and change via activities that do not have the identified characteristics of effectiveness” (p. 377). A third weak link in existing research, questioned by Webster-Wright (2009) and Liebermann and Mace (2010), and subsequently identified by Opfer and Pedder (2011) is that “few of these studies empirically connected the specific learning activities to specific changes in teacher belief. Fewer still go further to connect the learning activity to change in learning orientation and change in subsequent teaching practice” (2011, p. 390). That is, the evidential link between teacher learning and change in practice seems to be missing from most of the research related to teacher professional learning conducted prior to 2011.

More recent studies published since 2011 have attempted to link teacher professional development opportunities to teacher professional learning and change in a variety of ways. For example, in the USA, Kintz, Lane, Gotwals, & Cisterna (2015) used an exhaustive analysis of videotaped conversations to determine how teachers perceive the connection between theory and practice resulting from their professional learning facilitated through communities of inquiry. The evidence that teachers had translated their learning into changes in their classroom practice was gleaned from the videotaped conversations teachers had with one another in which they reflected on their practice. Fore, Feldhaus, Sorge, Agarwal, and Varahramyan (2015) focus on teacher subjectivity, through a theoretical lens informed by the work of Guattari and Foucault, to analyse focus group interview data in which teachers discuss the learning they believe has resulted from a particular professional development program and the likelihood that they will implement what they have learned in their own classrooms. A questionnaire was employed (Ottley et al., 2015) to gather early childhood educators’ perceptions of how their knowledge and beliefs around language and literacy practices had changed as a result of professional development. Observation of teachers’ classroom practice was not part of the data collection process and hence beliefs about learning were not empirically linked to change in practice in this

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