The discursive positioning of graduating teachers in accreditation of teacher education programs

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HIGHLIGHTS

- An Australian accreditation policy document on teacher education was examined.
- A mismatch between policy discourses and the academic archives was found.
- Accreditation based on graduating teacher identity and professional practice is needed.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper uses discourse analysis techniques associated with Foucauldian archaeology to examine a teacher education accreditation document from Australia to reveal how graduating teachers are constructed through the discourses presented. The findings reveal a discursive site of contestation within the document itself and a mismatch between the identified policy discourses and those from the academic archive. The authors suggest that rather than contradictory representations of what constitutes graduating teacher quality and professionalism, what is needed is an accreditation process that agrees on constructions of graduate identity and professional practice that enact an intellectual and reflexive form of professionalism.

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1. Introduction

First published in April 2011 by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), the *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and procedures* (AITSL, 2011) outlines the requirements against which Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs are assessed. The national system of accreditation has three integrated elements: (1) the graduate teacher standards which make explicit the knowledge, skills and attributes expected of graduating teachers from an accredited program; (2) program standards which describe the features of high quality ITE programs ensuring that the graduate standards can

be achieved; and, (3) the national accreditation process which details the establishment and composition of accreditation panels and their processes for assessment and reporting.

Standards research to date has mainly focussed around programs and practices associated with primary and secondary education ([Author 1], [Author 2], & [Colleague], 2012; Bourke, 2011; Clarke & Moore, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Ingvarson, 2010; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; NíChróinín, Tormey, & O'Sullivan, 2012; Sachs, 2003; Tang, Cheng, & So, 2006) with limited research at the tertiary level. Whilst there have been many studies around quality assurance procedures in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) particularly centred on European universities (see, for example, Billing, 2004; Brown, 2004; Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Frank, Kurth, & Mironowicz, 2012), none specifically comment on the use of standards in faculties of education. There have, however, been two Australian studies of this ilk: McArdle's (2010) study which outlined a roadmap used by one faculty of education in reconceptualising their undergraduate curriculum program in response to the Queensland College of Teachers' (QCT)

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standards, and Hudson's (2009) quantitative study which measured the perceptions of science pre-service teachers' development against the same standards. However, neither is based on the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2012), the current standards document in circulation. This dearth of research on the current standards/accreditation document at the tertiary level is problematic given the high stakes for graduates seeking employment as teachers. Using discourse analysis techniques associated with Foucauldian archaeology, this paper therefore presents the findings of an examination of the policy document used in Australia to accredit ITE programs.

The opening section outlines the theoretical/methodological framework for this study detailing our interpretation of Foucauldian archaeological analysis (for a detailed explanation of the methodology see Bourke & Lidstone, 2014) as a rigorous technique to examine the shaping of discourse in the *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and procedures* (AITSL, 2011) policy document. Following the archaeological approach, the significant voices of authority from the enunciative field of professionalism and teacher quality/professional standards are overviewed to highlight competing discourses from the academic archive. Then, the policy document is examined for statements that are the same (Step 1) but also ones that are different (Step 2) before the policy and academic discourses are cross analysed (Step 3) to see what transformations (if any) need to occur in accreditation processes (Step 4). The recent *Staff in Australia's schools 2013* report (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2014) claimed that over 50% of early career teachers felt underprepared to enter the classroom. Therefore this study is timely to investigate if the accreditation process provides clear guidelines of what constitutes a quality, professional graduating teacher who is classroom ready.

2. Theoretical/methodological framework

According to Michel Foucault, discourses encompass more than just what is said; they are also about what is thought, who can speak, when and with what authority (Foucault, 1995). The meanings of discourses are therefore not limited to spoken language but also arise from institutions and power relations. It therefore becomes necessary to ascertain who has the authority to speak (authorial intentions) (Ball, 1993) in accreditation discourses and indeed whose voices are privileged in the creation of policy that shapes the professional landscape for graduating teachers. Where policy is concerned, Gale reminds us of the interdiscursivity of discourses where dominant policy actors or "key players" (Dwyer, 1995, p. 476) serve to "oust the dominance of others" (Gale, 1999, p. 400) and a particular group's participation can be easily excluded and negated (Freeland, 1994). In this way, only "certain voices are heard at any point in time" (Ball, 1994, p. 16). Furthermore, Ball (1990) articulated how policy assembles collections of related policies, exercising power through the production of truth and knowledge as discourse. Ball referred to this as "intertextual compatibility" (Ball, 1990) so the use of supporting texts is also noted. Therefore, the authoritative texts and key players in the accreditation process are outlined in the findings section before the four steps of archaeological analysis to reveal the dominant discourses begins.

Step 1 in the archaeological analysis is an examination of the accreditation document for ITE looking for isomorphism or "sameness" in the statements. According to Foucault (1972), statements are the atoms or elementary units of discourse so it is important to pay particular attention to the continuities between statements as well as counting the frequency of terms and words (repeatability) and examining their arrangement and co-location within statements. Ball (1990) maintained that certain possibilities of thought are constructed by how words are ordered, combined, displaced and excluded. When statements cohere and make core repeatable claims of knowledge, they form discursive practices (or regimes of truth).

Discourses become "discursive practices" or "regimes of truth" as they convey the message about what are normal, establishing criteria (the standards/accreditation process) against which pre-service education courses are evaluated. Foucault defines "regimes of truth" as "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power" are "attached to the true" (Foucault, 1994, p. 132). He elaborates by saying that what needs to be looked for is the status of the truth — does the truth rest on fragile ground, "crumbling soil" (Foucault, 1972, p. 137) or on solid foundations? What allows the accreditation document to be read as an unproblematic statement of fact?

Step 2 uncovered irruptions, discontinuities, or distances between statements (fields of initial differentiation) within the document. Foucault (1972) referred to this as the analysis of "contradictions" (p. 149) and maintained that contradictions should be described as "they are not appearances to be overcome, nor secret principles to be uncovered" (p. 151). Therefore, in this step (Step 2) any words, phrases or statements which contradict the main discourses identified in Step 1 are highlighted.

Foucault (1972) further maintained that archaeology is a comparative analysis that is not intended to reduce the diversity of discourses. Rather, the intention is to have a diversifying effect. For this part of the analysis (Step 3) the findings are cross analysed with the academic literature on professionalism and teacher quality/professional standards to highlight the simultaneous and competing discourses in circulation.

Finally, the analysis of transformations (Step 4) reveals the implications that the contradictions, both within and between the policy document and the academic archive, have for the construction of graduate identity for pre-service teachers.

Before explicating the identified discourses from the policy document, the academic literature on professionalism and teacher quality/professional standards are overviewed so that the comparisons can occur later as part of the archaeological analysis (Step 3).

3. Academic literature on teacher professionalism and teacher quality/professional standards

3.1. Teacher professionalism — the academic archive

There have been many attempts to identify the essential characteristics of the professions over many years (see, for example, Freidson, 2001; Gewirtz, Mahony, Hextall, & Cribb, 2009; Goode, 1957; Marshall, 1939; Parsons, 1954; Purvis, 1973; Stinnett & Huggett, 1963; Travers & Rebore, 1990; Wilensky, 1964). Most of these writers agree that a professional engages in intellectual work, partakes in a preparation programme with ongoing in-service learning and has been admitted to practice as they have met the standards set up by members of their professional organisation. This "traditional" discourse of professionalism modelled on the learned professions (doctors and lawyers) and originating in 18th century Europe has been called "classical professionalism" (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996) in the education setting. However, for many commentators (see, for example, Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whitty, 2000; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Hoyle, 1974; Leaton Gray & Whitty, 2010) some of the characteristics, namely professional knowledge and autonomy, are not agreed upon, so definitions still remain a site of struggle.

In the mid-1990s, Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) put forward