Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment: An intervention project at the intersection of standards, professional knowledge and assessment

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Abstract

The benchmarking of education systems has been accompanied by an increasing policy interest in the evidence base for initial teacher education and the related claims about graduate quality. In some countries, this has also fuelled the move to install standards that seek to specify competence on entry to teaching and at stages of career progression. In Australia, referents for these efforts include the *Australian professional standards for teachers: Graduate teachers* (AITSL, 2011), and National Program Standards (AITSL, 2015). It was in the context of policy-driven reform in Australian initial teacher education (ITE) that a consortium of 13 ITE providers from states and territories came together to trial the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA). Underpinning the work from the start was the recognition of the need for collective action and collaborative professionalism in authentic cultural change. In this paper I will present some insights into the lived experience of the GTPA, identifying both conceptual and practical aspects and some lessons learned.

Introduction

In Australia, efforts at system reform and change in initial teacher education (ITE) are attempting to infuse standards into practice within the broader goal of building an evidentiary basis for showing both graduate competence and the quality of ITE programs. This includes the policy initiative to move towards teacher performance assessments. The aim of the following discussion is to present some foundational understandings of the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA)[1], and to open discussion of how collaborative professionalism[2] can support cultural change in ITE.

The turn to professional standards

The increasing use of criteria-based approaches to assessment and the parallel rise of interest in professional standards in teacher education are consequences of decades of research in educational assessment and evaluation, and what Sadler (2005) refers to as the sound theoretical rationale and educational effectiveness of these approaches. However, the arrival of professional standards and the aligned focus on instrument validation, judgement consistency and moderation have not been uniformly greeted as positive in teacher education. This reflects the competing views of the function of assessment standards and how they serve to support (or limit) the agency of those involved in ITE.

In 2011, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) promulgated the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) (AITSL, 2011) to provide a basis for quality improvement and competence within the profession. With national and state commitment to standards as necessary quality indicators of teacher education, the latest shift was to introduce national program standards (AITSL, 2015) to be applied in all higher education institutions (HEIs). The imperative of implementing professional standards and program standards has given rise to intensifying calls for reforming ITE. These calls fuelled the latest review of the TEMAG report (2014) and a key recommendation to introduce teacher performance assessments to provide evidence of graduate teacher competence.

While standards and assessment are featured in several ITE reports internationally, expectations of the nature and function of standards appear to vary, even considerably (e.g. Wyatt-Smith & Looney, 2016). A fundamental conclusion of the TEMAG report is the requirement for a move to *standards as inputs* and evidence to show *standards achieved.* This involves the introduction of teacher performance assessments (TPAs) as culminating assessments intended to produce summative evidence of professional competence.

Building an evidence base in initial teacher education

The concept of the GTPA was framed within the notion of assessment as a post-modern project (Broadfoot, 2009). In this enterprise, a priority was to validate the instrument. This included applying recognised standard-setting methodologies; generating evidence showing how these methodologies had been applied; undertaking moderation to show the reliability and degree of judgement consistency; setting the standard at the threshold or cut-score, and finally, producing exemplars as referents for the standard. This approach heralded the carrying forward of the traditional assessment canons of validity and reliability, along with the trilogy of standards, evidence and moderation. A related goal is to ensure the connectedness of the GTPA back to the APSTs, a necessary condition for it to function as a summative culminating assessment of pre-service teacher competence. In undertaking this work, the extant literature on existing TPAs was examined, along with a wide range of research in teacher education, and more generally, on teaching, learning and assessment. This was foundational to establishing the underlying conceptions of teaching and assessment design to be taken up in the project.

Collaborative professionalism

One aim was to open the way for new identities for pre-service teachers and new relationships with teacher educators, supervising teachers (sometimes known as mentors or school-based teacher educators), and policy personnel through a model of dynamically networked relationships. A second aim was to address underpinning conceptions of teaching and the design issues in the architecture of the instrument. Operationally, consideration was given to how to make the four dimensions of the assessment – purpose, context, mode and organisation – fit-for-purpose. The focus was on teacher knowledge and decision-making and the appraisal of the impact of teaching on learning. We considered collaboration outside of traditional compartments of ITE (school/universities), engaging with Teacher Education Regulatory Authorities,

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[1] The GTPA was developed by the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, ACU, beginning 2015, and implemented in a large-scale trial with a consortium of 13 universities and other stakeholders. We wish to acknowledge the partnership with the regulatory authority, the Queensland College of Teachers, the funding support of AITSL and ACU, and the commitment of teacher educators. The GTPA has received endorsement from AITSL for implementation in Australian Higher Education Institutions in 2018.

[2] Collaborative professionalism involves actors in teacher education from universities, schools and employing authorities working together on problem-solving and inquiry into practice.

education sectors and related employment authorities. We also considered the desired dispositions of early career teachers that put student learning at the centre, along with developing evaluative abilities to appraise the impact of practice on student learning. This framing suited the perspective that we were bringing to the question: Who is responsible for ITE? Our collective answer was that, in order to improve ITE, responsibility was to be vested with teacher educators and shared in new types of relationships with schools. This approach supported the goal for multiple research, policy and practice perspectives to come together for the rigorous and systematic work of validating the GTPA, applying recognised methodologies for standard setting and moderation.

Throughout, we recognised the opportunities for collaboration and for prioritising agency in and with the profession as a means to counter-balance any press for standardisation in ITE. We also recognised what Broadfoot (2009, p. viii) referred to as the 'combination of bureaucratic administration, widespread social penetration and global dispersal which the 20th century development of examination and assessment of all kinds produced, and further, how these had produced a megalith so deeply rooted in public consciousness and so powerful in its influence that alternatives are almost literally inconceivable'. The opportunity was there for organically growing a new type of agency in ITE through a shared focus on the GTPA. However, for this to be realised, there was a clear need to capture the knowledge, skills and capabilities in the APSTs and to build these into the GTPA in ways recognisable to the teaching profession and Australian Regulatory Authorities responsible for ITE program accreditation and teacher registration.

We also recognised from the start that the fields of educational assessment and measurement, and the field of teacher education had tended to remain compartmentalised from one another. The project provided a context for authentic collaboration across disciplines and more specifically, at a substantial scale across institutions that had not come together previously for a common enterprise and shared dialogue. Systematic processes for standard setting, validation and moderation provided the reason and the contexts for collaborative professionalism, referred to earlier. The collaborations spanned geographic borders, university programs from early years to senior schooling, and state and federal government policy and curriculum contexts.

The next section of this paper gives a brief overview of two considerations that needed to be addressed in developing and implementing the GTPA, first is the expectation of authenticity as a design feature of the instrument, and second, the requirement that the GTPA provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to demonstrate competence in planning, teaching, assessing, reflecting and appraising, including the use of evidence to inform practice.

Designing an Australian teacher performance assessment

Part 1: Authenticity as a design feature

In the Australian context, a TPA is expected to *show* classroom practice. It also must be *authentic*, and provide a culminating assessment of competence or profession readiness. An authentic assessment has been described as one that can assist pre-service teachers to link 'generalizations about practice to apparently idiosyncratic, contextualized instances of learning' and 'include opportunities for developing and examining teachers' thinking and actions in situations that are experience based and problem oriented' (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000, p. 524). The authenticity of the assessment is inherent in its ability to capture pedagogic decision-making in real time. This is connected to its claim to be ecologically valid and 'representative of the way knowledge and skills are used in real-world contexts' (Stobart & Gipps, 2010, p. 204). Authenticity is recognised through the specific knowledge and ways of working within a knowledge domain or discipline, beginning with initial planning decisions based on collected data and evidence of student learning to teaching decisions taken in situ. This calls for discernment in deciding to continue with, adapt or alter a teaching plan by revising, differentiating, or accelerating learning in whole-class settings and for individual students, according to students' specific learning needs and dependent on the continuous flow of information over the course of a lesson. Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000, p. 527) outlined four aspects of authentic assessments of teaching:

1. Assessments sample the actual knowledge, skills, and dispositions desired of teachers as they are used in teaching and learning contexts, rather than relying on more remote proxies.

2. Assessments require the integration of multiple kinds of knowledge and skill as they are used in practice.

3. Multiple sources of evidence are collected over time and in diverse contexts.

4. Assessment evidence is evaluated by individuals with relevant expertise against criteria that matter for performance in the field.

Part 2: A focus on evidence and 'showing' practice

The GTPA has been designed to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to demonstrate how they are active professionals and how their judgements support learning and learners. This extends to how actual teaching practices and instructional decision-

making are informed by actual evidence of learning. For this reason, the GTPA is concerned with the demonstration of competence and the in-the-head decision-making that informs the actions and talk in the classroom. A pre-service teacher's use of evidence to establish a student's current level of performance, the desired level of performance, and strategies to close the gap is part of this decision-making. This stance is consistent with the value of selecting and incorporating evidence from a range of possible sources, and using this to plan, review, modify and improve teaching and learning that has been identified as an important skill for contemporary teachers (Hamilton et al., 2009; Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003; Matters, 2006).

There is a growing body of research and policy material (Wyatt-Smith, Alexander, Fishburn, & McMahon, 2017) that suggests that assessment is not always explicitly or systematically taught in teacher education academic programs. The GTPA can be viewed as a response to the observation in the TEMAG report that assessment capabilities should be a strengthened focus in ITE, as mentioned earlier. The assessment field has known for some time the importance of developing teachers who are data savvy, are able to use evidence in instructional decision-making, and provide effective feedback. Cowie and Cooper (2016, p. 159) have described it as 'the growing imperative for teachers (student teachers, mentor teachers and initial teacher educators) to be assessment and data literate'.

Mandinach and Gummer (2016) have proposed a conceptual framework identifying a vast array of knowledge, skills and dispositions that teachers require for data literacy. This focus on dispositions is not new. Several decades earlier, Sadler (1987) identified the assessment dispositions that teachers need to guide their practice, including their willingness to develop students' evaluative expertise over the course of their schooling. This will not occur routinely. Instead, Sadler makes clear that it requires that explicit provision be made in the course of instruction to build students' own assessment knowledge, including knowledge about the desired features of quality performance, and opportunities for students to develop abilities to self-monitor quality on completion of a piece of work and during its production. Further, for the teacher, instructional decisions can be made based on an interpretation of previously collected evidence of learning as well as in-the-moment or incidental (unplanned) evidence collection. The latter can include observations as well as decisions taken in the course of classroom

talk and interactions in whole class, small groups and in working with individuals. The GTPA has been designed to provide evidence that pre-service teachers are discerning in how they plan; the choices they make in collecting evidence; how they infer meaning from the evidence, drawing on theory and research, and how they take action in their practice to progress learning. A main challenge for GTPA design was capturing decision-making in progress. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005, p. 68) describe this process as activating reflection during teaching 'to make contact with the core qualities which are of importance at that particular moment'. Reflective practice involves pre-service teachers critically analysing, justifying and defending their pedagogic decision-making in context. The focus here is on the 'why' of teaching – why is one strategy/practice better to use than another for this child or group of children? When asking 'why', pre-service teachers are required to not only articulate their practice but also justify their pedagogic decisions through connecting research, theory and practice. This perspective on reflective practice offers 'a lens that can usefully link the background experiences and beliefs of a teacher to his understandings of his own practice' (Edwards & Edwards, 2017, p. 191).

Conclusion

In conclusion we offer four main ideas. First, we join with Donaldson (2010) in asserting that 'quality teacher education has to have a strong evidence base' (p. 56), while we also recognise how measures of effectiveness are difficult to identify and disentangle from other factors. Second, we highlight the fundamental significance of how professional standards for teaching are conceptualised and how they are expected to function. Third, we see merit in connecting *standards as decontextualised expectations* of practice and *standards as evidence*, the aim being to prepare teachers to be active professionals who bring an inquiry approach to their practice and a willingness to 'see' its impact on learning. Finally, the model of teacher preparation that divided the academic program from the school-based program, usually known as 'prac', is no longer relevant. We have the opportunity for collaborative professionalism across teacher educators in schools and universities, with employing agencies and with accreditation agencies. Nothing less than this is needed if we are to rebuild the status of the profession and maintain public confidence in teacher preparation.

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