

Changing lives and standardising teachers: The possibilities and limits of professional standards

SUSANNE GANNON

University of Western Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT: Along with a range of other neoliberal managerial incursions into education, the bureaucratisation of teachers' work has included the development of Professional Standards that regulate the profession and purport to improve teacher quality. This paper begins by contrasting two alternative approaches to standards in Australia, the new, centrally developed National Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011a) and the earlier profession-developed Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (AATE/ALEA, 2002). It examines the differing designs, contexts and effects of these sets of standards, and maps differences and similarities between them. The second half of the paper then turns to narratives from prominent Australians of their outstanding English teachers in Teachers Who Change Lives (Metcalf & Game, 2006) and My Favourite Teacher (Macklin, 2011), reading these narratives through the standards frameworks. The paper concludes that the shift to a regulatory and managerial approach to the teaching profession risks obscuring many of the essential elements of good teaching, in particular the affective dimensions that mobilise and animate teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: Professional standards, English teachers, narrative, education policy.

INTRODUCTION

Current government rhetoric both in Australia and internationally is in agreement with the teaching profession that good teachers are key contributors to effective educational outcomes for young people, although views about how good teachers can be developed, recognised and rewarded differ (Larsen, 2010). Systemic approaches include National Professional Standards and proposed performance pay incentives. However, the effectiveness of such strategies, mostly imported from industry and impacting on education as part of a moving global policyscape of performativity remains uncertain (Ball, 2008; 2010).

This paper presents a close analysis of standards discourses as represented in *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011a) in Australia and contrasts these with the earlier profession-generated *Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia* (or "STELLA") project (Australian Association for Teachers of English/Australian Literacy Educators Association [AATE/ALEA], 2002). Comparison of these two sets of standards in the first section of the paper draws attention to the contrasting discourses that underpin them, problematizes normative assumptions of professional standards, and contributes to an interpretive model that can be put to use to read accounts of classroom practice. With a particular focus on English teachers and secondary schools, the second half of the paper then puts the model to use by

rereading narrative accounts of influential teachers from two recent Australian anthologies through the lens of standardisation. It analyses discussions of the “good teacher” and the detailed accounts of particular English teachers in *Teachers who change lives* (Metcalf & Game, 2006) and *My Favourite Teacher* (Macklin, 2011) in order to provisionally identify which characteristics can be captured in the standards and which cannot. It considers whether excessive focus on individual teachers might distract attention from broader contexts. The paper concludes by suggesting that teaching is affectively, relationally and materially contingent, and that the homogenising strategies of current standards frameworks are ill equipped to recognise this contingency.

Theoretically, the paper is an unorthodox intervention into policy critique. It is inspired by calls for narrative accounts that might disrupt more conventional approaches to policy critique (for example, Kamuf, 2007; Lather, 2010; Stronach, 2010). It intersects with Ball’s concerns that there has been a denial of “the primacy of human relationships in the production of value [in education], in effect erasing the social” (2008, p. 22), and with previous work into relationality, affect and education (Davies & Gannon, 2009; Gannon & Davies, 2007; Gannon, 2012a, 2012b; Mulcahy, 2011; Watkins, 2010, 2012). Whilst it foregrounds the new mandatory *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (or “NPST”) standards (AITSL, 2011a), it also explores previous work on professional standards in the *Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia* (or “STELLA”) project (AATE/ALEA, 2002), that emphasised narrative and invited collegial inquiry into practice, and considers how this approach to standards differs from the current context.

In its focus on language and its effects, the paper is shaped by discourse analysis approaches that demand close readings of language in context. As Doecke and Gill suggested a decade ago, standards “must first be conceptualised as language – as texts or discourse – the act of interpretation cannot be dispensed with” (2000/2001, p. 11)¹. Although the NPST and STELLA are published in various formats, this paper focuses on the key documents that describe each of the standards frameworks: the 28-page booklet *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, published in February 2011 (AITSL, 2011a) and the ten-page STELLA Standards description document (AATE/ALEA, 2002). The first half of the paper samples the language used in these documents, and suggests some of the ways that teachers are variously positioned by and through standards discourses. The second half of the paper takes published narrative accounts of influential English teachers by their ex-students as “data” and examines these in relation to the interpretive model derived from the Standards.

STANDARDISING TEACHERS: NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS & STELLA

In Australia, one of the major tasks of the statutory authority, the Australian Institute for Teaching Standards and Leadership (AITSL) on its establishment in 2010, was to deliver the first consistent national framework for monitoring teacher quality in Australia. Although states remain responsible for teacher accreditation/registration, deployment and salaries – and marked discrepancies remain between salaries and

¹ Thanks to my reviewers and editor for this insight and many others that have contributed significantly to the redrafting of this paper.

conditions for teachers in public schools in different states, and between public and independent schools – the shift towards a national framework of professional standards was intended to streamline teacher mobility across state borders and to provide a regulatory mechanism upon which claims of teacher equivalence and excellence across sites might be made. The *National Professional Standards for Teachers* are part of a wider package of standardising educational reforms that are rolling out across the nation, including national mandatory NAPLAN testing and the Australian curriculum, to be implemented in all states from 2013 in years P-10 in English, Maths, History and Science, with other subjects to follow.

The focus of the NPST Standards is on mapping “quality teaching” onto a grid upon which teachers can plot themselves at various career points, so that their employing authorities can accredit and reward individual teachers. The *National Professional Standards for Teachers* assume a developmental and incremental progress of teachers through the profession. It assumes that teacher quality impacts on student outcomes. Indeed the Preamble to the document highlights: “The crucial role of the teacher” and elaborates that “teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement.... [Teachers] have the greatest impact on student learning, far outweighing the impact of any other education program or policy” (AITSL, 2011a, p. 3). The document claims that “improving teacher quality is considered an essential reform as part of Australia’s efforts to improve student attainment” (p. 3), implying that there are current deficiencies in teacher quality that will be repairable through increasing monitoring and regulation of individuals through the standards and other strategies of performance management. It assumes that teacher quality is a factor that is isolable and the property of individuals, rather than contingent and relational. The NPST acknowledges that teachers are both “the greatest resource” and the biggest drain on educational resources as “they account for the vast majority of expenditure in school education” (p. 3). The standards might be considered as a state-sponsored apparatus of governmentality, in a Foucauldian sense, in that teachers are inculcated into the standards, taking them up – more or less – as their own (Foucault, 1979, 1982, 2000). From this perspective, the standards become a disciplinary apparatus through which teachers engage in surveillance of themselves and each other, in the terms of the standards, and through which the sovereign authority of the state can regulate a discrete segment of the population.

In order to enter and progress through the profession, teachers must learn to use the language of the standards. Not only must they learn how they are organised, but they must also learn to “perform themselves”² in relation to these at various times across four identified career stages. That is, they must learn to describe their teacher identities through the framework of the standards as they engage in self- and peer-assessment, compile and critique evidence portfolios and participate in the performance management processes that dominate schools. Current teachers have learned to do this in recent years as different state authorities (for example, NSW Institute of Teachers) rolled out their own versions of professional standards, which will all be superseded by the national NPST from 2013.

² See Ball (2006, 2008, 2010) and Stronach (2010) for further discussion of performativity and professional standards.

New teachers in particular, who have had their university-based, pre-service education degrees reorganised around mandated Professional standards, are adept at articulating their teacher selves in relation to the standards grid. Many university-based teacher educators, who have been obliged to rewrite their courses to fit the standards as part of recent cycles of course accreditation, and many of whom also contribute to the activities of state and federal regulatory bodies, are also deeply invested in the standards and their circulation and have widely adopted the language of standards in their everyday practice and course documentation. Increased regulation of tertiary institutions as well as the profession through the standards is clearly indicated in the Preamble to the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011a), which identifies a need for “enhancing pre-service teacher education” (p. 1). The Preamble suggests that the Standards, in themselves, will “contribute to professionalisation of teaching and raise the status of the profession” (AITSL, 2011a, p. 2). Other factors that may have impacted on the status and integrity of the profession over recent times, including sustained media attacks and inequitable school funding practices, are rendered invisible in these individualising standards discourses.

Professional knowledge		Professional practice			Professional engagement	
1. Know students and how they learn	2. Know the content and how to teach it	3. Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning	4. Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments	5. Assess and provide feedback and report on student learning	6 Engage in professional learning	7. Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers & the community
Subdivided into six focus areas, with descriptors for <i>Graduate</i> <i>Proficient</i> <i>Highly accomplished</i> <i>Lead</i>	Subdivided into six focus areas...	Subdivided into seven focus areas....	Subdivided into four focus areas...	Subdivided into five focus areas...	Subdivided into four focus areas...	Subdivided into four focus areas...

Table 1. Summary of NPST, 2001³

The three domains of teaching in the NPST are Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Seven standards are listed under these. Each of the seven standards is then unpacked into multiple “focus areas”, each of which has a descriptor of what this focus area entails at each of the four career levels. For example, Standard 1 (under the domain of Professional Knowledge) is “Know students and how they learn”. This standard lists six distinct focus areas: 1.1 Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students; 1.2 Understand how students learn; 1.3 Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds; 1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities; 1.6 Strategies to support full participation of students with disability. Altogether there are 38 focus areas subsumed under the three domains and seven standards.

³ Access full document at:

http://www.aitsl.edu.au/verve/resources/AITSL_National_Professional_Standards_for_Teachers.pdf

Graduates from properly accredited teacher education courses are deemed to have met the GRADUATE level, by virtue of their graduation, but this entitles them merely to provisional professional status. They can only acquire full registration as teachers at the level of PROFICIENT by documenting themselves against the dimensions of the standards grid, and are usually supported to do this by school personnel during their first year of full-time work⁴. This self-evaluation against the standards happens again for those teachers who decide to proceed though to the optional higher categories of HIGHLY ACCOMPLISHED and then of LEAD teacher, and in doing so they must gather evidence for each of the 38 focus areas. Despite the Preamble's stressing that the "Standards are interconnected, interdependent and overlapping" (AITSL, 2011a, p. 5), it is likely that the application of the standards in practice to justify career progression risks creating an excessively atomistic understanding of teacher work.

Although the intent and the effect of the standards appear to be the management of the teacher population, the Preamble claims that their development has been a collaborative process. Initially the National Standards were compiled in consultation with each of the state regulatory authorities (for example, the NSW Institute of Teachers), and the final set of standards is partially shaped by the state standards that they will supersede, incorporating and building upon them, as well as taking account of similar models overseas and locally. The Preamble asserts that an "extensive validation process involving almost 6,000 teachers ensured that each descriptor was shaped by the profession" (AITSL, 2011a, p. 3). Some of this "validation" entailed a turn to the disciplines and Professional Associations representing those disciplines. For example, the Australian Association of Teachers of English had a representative on the Validation Steering Committee through the trial period and, along with other Professional Associations, AATE worked across the latter half of 2011 to develop "illustrations of practice" for the AITSL standards. On other occasions, AATE representatives were invited to focus-group days and stakeholder meetings. However, the purpose of such gatherings was, as the document says, the relatively limited process of "validation" rather than more profound engagement in the conceptualisation or development of the standards. In this paper I turn to an earlier and arguably more comprehensive and participatory experiment in the development of professional standards in the pioneering STELLA project developed a decade earlier.

In 2002, with their sibling organisation (the Australian Literacy Educators' Association {ALEA}), the Australian Association of Teachers of English (AATE) launched a collaboratively developed set of professional standards for English teachers called STELLA – *Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia* (2002), inspired by the US NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) developed standards. The commonalities and differences between the STELLA standards and the AITSL standards provide intriguing insights into the different purposes and effects of Standards discourses. Notably, and in contrast to NPST, STELLA was a research project led by the profession, through its representative professional associations, which then recruited bureaucratic partners in two state education authorities (Victoria and Western Australia). While STELLA also provided extensive descriptors of professional practice, and organised these into a sort of descriptive grid, unlike NPST, STELLA was not promoted as a regulatory apparatus. Its design is not conducive to external performance assessments because it

⁴ See for example, Bill's account in Gannon (2012b).

does not map incremental development across phases of a linear career path. Its fundamental purpose and design differs radically from NPST. However both NPST and STELLA use the same three domains to organize their Standards: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Within these, there are some interesting similarities and curious anomalies.

As STELLA is not a developmental grid, rather than differentiating between relative degrees of professionalism, it delivers much more detailed and discipline-specific descriptions of what “accomplished teachers of English and literacy believe, know and are able to do” (AATE/ALEA, 2002, p. 2). Over a series of meetings of working parties of English teachers in each state and nationally, the STELLA framework was developed by “distilling clusters or ‘families’ of descriptive statements into a standards framework of ‘key words’ that might capture in the broadest possible way, attributes or essential qualities of good teachers” (Doecke & Gill, 2000/2001, p. 11). The keywords were then linked back, through open-ended questions designed to provoke professional conversations, to contextually rich narratives of practice. For example, to use the equivalent Standard 1 of “Professional Knowledge” in STELLA, “Teachers know their students”, the relevant keywords are INSIGHT, SENSITIVITY and DIFFERENCE. Eleven classroom narrative accounts are provided as “illustrative narratives” of Standard 1. Each of the keywords is reframed as an open-ended question designed to encourage critical conversations around the narratives and invite reflection on local classroom practice. For example, INSIGHT is accompanied by “How well does the teacher know the individual learner?” and this is linked to several narratives from different years of schooling, each of which is linked to several keywords. For example, in a narrative tagged with INSIGHT and COMPLEXITY about teaching in a “literacy skills unit” with Aboriginal boys, a teacher describes the depth of interrogation of language and its effects in the world that began for her students with an Oodgeroo Noonucal story. She concludes: “This kind of teaching and learning is certainly not ‘complete’ in one lesson (if ever)...However, a fracture or disruption did occur and other possibilities (alternative ways of thinking) had been given space” (Carmichael, 2002, p. 2).

All of the narratives by the STELLA English teachers retain the specificity and complexity of particular locations, contexts and moments and invite teachers to engage in “extended interpretative readings” of each account rather than “simply pinning down their accounts as definitive exemplars” of the standards in practice (Doecke & Gill, 2000/2001, p. 11). They also draw attention to the time and space that significant teaching and learning can involve.

STELLA is not a developmental grid like the NPST, describing incremental levels of proficiency that can be demonstrated via evidence portfolios. In the STELLA standards, accomplishment is not an optional higher level, beyond mere proficiency, like the NPST “Highly Accomplished Teacher” stage, that a teacher can apply for and be judged against by herself and others. Rather, accomplishment is considered an ongoing aspiration for all English teachers. This is not assumed to be a linear process, nor is “accomplishment” necessarily a secure or permanent achievement that can be ticked off. The STELLA standards are explicitly designed to assist in reflective and collaborative inquiry into practice (Doecke, 2006; Doecke & Gill, 2000/2001; Doecke & Parr, 2011). The individual standards are articulated in much more detail than the NPST. The keywords and focus questions direct readers to make use of them “for

reflection and discussion”. Overall, there are 28 keywords across the STELLA standards, and therefore 28 questions that might be used in professional learning contexts to inquire into what good practice, or “quality teaching” in a subject-specific context might look like. STELLA teacher narratives on the website provide exemplars from real English classrooms. The keywords, questions and narratives were all collaboratively generated by teachers in contrast to the AISTL approach, which Doecke and Parr characterise as tokenistic in “reducing the profession to reacting to statements produced by anonymous others, rather than giving teachers support to generate meaningful statements that might capture the full complexity of what they do”, as, they argue, was the case with STELLA (Doecke and Parr, 2011, p. 11).

Professional knowledge			Professional practice			Professional engagement	
1.1 Teachers know their students with three keywords: <i>Insight</i> <i>Sensitivity</i> <i>Difference</i> and questions elaborated from each of the keywords	1.2. Teachers know their subject with three keywords: <i>Rigour</i> <i>Ideology</i> <i>Justification</i>	1.3. Teachers know how students learn to become powerfully literate with six keywords: <i>Challenge</i> <i>Complexity</i> <i>Fairness</i> <i>Inclusiveness</i> <i>Significance</i> <i>Growth</i>	2.1. Teachers plan for effective learning with four keywords: <i>Responsibility</i> <i>Negotiation</i> <i>Repertoire</i> <i>Resources</i>	2.2. Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment with four key words: <i>Trust</i> <i>Respect</i> <i>Participation</i> <i>Momentum</i>	2.3. Teachers assess and review student learning and plan for future learning with three key words: <i>feedback</i> <i>review</i> <i>accountability</i>	3.1. Teachers demonstrate commitment with three key words: <i>enjoyment</i> <i>enthusiasm</i> <i>dedication</i>	3.2. Teachers continue to learn with three key words: <i>reflection</i> <i>critique</i> <i>development</i>

Table 2. Summary of STELLA, 2002⁵

There are marked similarities between the STELLA and NPST standards at the highest level, in particular between the labels given to particular standards within each domain, albeit with interesting minor variations. For example, in Professional Knowledge, the STELLA standard 1.3 – “Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate” – seems merely to have been collapsed with STELLA standard 1.1 “Teachers know their students” into NPST 1.1, “Know students and how they learn”. However, a closer reading suggests that the more existential dimension of STELLA 1.1 of “knowing” students as people, separate from their subjectification as potential learners has drifted out of the NPST framework. The opening sentence of the “core description” of STELLA Standard 1.1 – “Accomplished English/ Literacy teachers recognise each student’s uniqueness” – doesn’t seem to fit into the more recent evidence-based and developmental paradigm. Ambiguous or difficult-to-measure aspects, particularly those that are oriented towards affective dimensions of

⁵ Access full standards at <http://www.stella.org.au>

experience, seem to be absent in the new regulatory standards approach. Curiously, given the overt focus on quality teaching and improving student outcomes, the equivalent of STELLA standard 2.2 – “Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment” – has become NPST Standard 4, “Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments”. Although I would never advocate an unsafe or unsupportive learning environment, the emphasis on support and safety might suggest the permeation of risk-averse discourses into education. “Challenge” does appear in Standard 3, “Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning”, but rather than focusing on classroom atmosphere or tenor more broadly, this is represented in more measurable terms as 3.1, “Establish challenging learning goals”. Surprisingly, most of the 28 keywords or concepts that are used to unpack the STELLA standards are entirely absent in the NPST standards. Those that do not appear at all are: Insight, Sensitivity, Rigour, Ideology, Justification, Complexity, Fairness, Significance, Growth, Negotiation, Trust, Momentum, Persistence, Review, Accountability, Enjoyment, Enthusiasm, Dedication, Reflection, Critique, Collaboration and Advocacy.

Some of the absences can be explained by changes in terminology, with for example, “Difference” now described through NPST 1.3: “diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds”. “Ideology” may seem oddly archaic, but the concept that approaches to teaching are informed by “ideas and values” seems crucial for a thorough understanding of professional practice, and the capacity of a teacher to articulate and justify the “knowledge, skill and understandings he/she values in teaching and learning” (AITSL, 2011a, p. 8) seems important if teachers are to overcome the banality of “it’s in the Syllabus” as the best explanation of why we do what we do in English classrooms. “Advocacy” may have activist tones that are problematic in a regulatory framework in these neoliberal times. Interestingly also, while STELLA 3.2 characterised “Development” as the capacity of teachers to determine *their own* “professional learning goals”, recognising that accomplished teachers take up opportunities “to learn from courses, colleagues and the workplace”, the NPST is more directive. In a strangely circular movement in 6.1 – “Identify and plan professional learning needs” – teachers at every career stage are directed to use the National Professional Standards for Teachers to identify “professional learning needs” (rather than “goals”), and to align these with “school and/or system priorities” (6.2). There seems to be no possibility that individual “needs” might not align with externally mandated institutional “priorities” and no indication of how tensions might be resolved. This drift away from autonomy in determining one’s own professional learning trajectory was noted by Doecke, Parr and North in their *National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning* Report, and now appears to have solidified in these focal areas of Standard 6 (Doecke, Parr & North, 2008; Doecke & Parr, 2011). It is indicative of the erasure of context and contingency that characterises managerialist discourses. Although teachers at higher levels are encouraged to access, conduct and critique relevant research (6.2 and 6.3), there is no clear suggestion in the NPST document that universities, and the robust research training that they specialise in, might have any role in professional learning.

Overall, in the fine detail of the two standards projects, they are vastly different. The NPST Standards were never intended as a revision of the STELLA standards, and it is impossible to determine the extent to which the writers may have known of, or drawn upon, the STELLA project. However, given that both projects had a national reach

and were attempting to represent the same object of knowledge – the professional work of good teachers – the differences are noteworthy. The STELLA standards were designed – from the inauguration of the project through the development and refinement of the framework and all its component parts through their intended use in professional learning contexts – to situate teachers at the centre of all their activities. They do not imply any linearity or hierarchy but they construct accomplished teaching in English as holistic, complex and always contextually located. The NPST standards in contrast are more suited to lockstep progression through the profession. Notably, there is an absence of affective and relational dimensions of teaching and learning (enjoyment, enthusiasm, insight, trust, sensitivity) in the NPST standards, relative to the STELLA standards that foregrounded these aspects. Yet, as the second half of this paper demonstrates, these are the very aspects of teaching practice that seem to be broadly valued by the community. These dimensions arose again and again in the English teacher narratives in *My Favourite Teacher* (Macklin, 2011) and *Teachers Who Change Lives* (Metcalf & Game, 2006). My intention in the second half of the paper is to attend to the dimensions of teaching and learning that the contemporary standards fail to capture. The elaborate teacher-student engagements in these accounts cannot be fully comprehended in the way that the NPST standards presume. In contrast, the provisional nature of the STELLA standards suggests more of the unpredictable and distinctive qualities of good teaching in English classrooms and beyond.

CHANGING LIVES

If the first half of this paper seems belaboured in its detail, weighted by the density of standards discourses, I hope that the second half will be animated by narratives about actual students and teachers. Obviously, as their titles stress “favourite” and the capacities of teachers to “change lives”, at first glimpse each of these books seems oriented towards the affective domain and each book contains emotionally loaded narratives. Nevertheless, the language that they use provides insights into how these prominent Australians think about the teachers they had in their childhood. Obviously, they do not “rate” their teachers in terms of the grid of professional standards provided by either NPST or STELLA, but rather they construct narratives of memory in their own words.

It would be anachronistic to apply either set of standards to the narratives celebrating teachers in these books. However, the narratives do enable me to gesture towards affective dimensions of teaching that escape the purview of standards. The teachers that are recalled in the narratives are sketched as characters, as are the child selves of the authors, and the narratives organise events in time and space, “emplotting” the moment that to them seems “life-changing” or that articulates what “favourite” means to them many decades later.

In the first book, *Teachers who change lives* (Metcalf & Game, 2006), using what they call a sociological “relational logic” (p. xii), Metcalf and Game organise accounts from interviews they conducted in a framework of what they call “universal themes” that emerged from the data. Each of these themes names one of the chapters, and excerpts from the interviews are used to illustrate and elaborate the themes and subthemes in each chapter. In contrast, in *My Favourite Teacher* (2011), Macklin

organises the narratives chronologically through sections including “Infants and primary schools” and “Secondary schools”. No commentary or attempt to extract themes or broader insights is imposed by the editor, apart from the title *My Favourite Teacher* and the back cover marketing blurb that again emphasises change: “famous and not-so-famous Australians write about the teachers who changed their minds, changed who they thought they could be, and changed their lives” (Macklin, 2011, cover). Although teachers from all disciplines are lauded, this section of the paper concentrates only on the first-person accounts in each book that are specifically about English teachers.

On the back cover of *Teachers Who Change Lives*, Metcalfe and Game are described as winners of the Vice Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching at their university. As officially excellent teachers themselves, they seem well qualified to map excellence in the profession more broadly and the back cover blurb positions their project in contrast to alternative understandings of teaching as the moulding of students towards “externally based measures of excellence”. Rather it suggests that outstanding teachers are those that enable students to “reach their full potential by teaching them to follow their passions and interests” (2006, cover). Overall, Metcalfe and Game interviewed thirty-eight people, with twenty-five profiled in the book. The English teachers of long ago who are recalled as life-changers do not necessarily demonstrate “progressive” pedagogies, but there is something in the quality of engagement with both their subject and their students, as individuals, that is memorable. In her interview with Metcalfe and Game, well-known author Helen Garner recalls the moment when, as a quiet year 6 student, she asked Mrs Dunkley a question:

...I remember she looked at me and I just thought at that moment she looked at me as if – you know, looking back as a grown-up – I felt she looked at me with respect because I asked a question that showed that I was actually interested or that I was getting through to her. But I always remember that: asking about how could an adverb modify an adjective, and she gave me an example *and I got it*. It was one of those moments of joy and learning. (Metcalfe & Game, 2006, p. 2)

As Metcalfe and Game explain, this is a moment when the girl “learned who she was”, in that look “of surprise of gratitude, of recognition, of respect and perhaps affection” (2006, p. 2). The absolutely singular experience that the girl has with her teacher is what stays with her across the decades. The other students in the room drop away in the moment of intense engagement, at least for the child. For the teacher, it may be an ordinary event – a child puts her hand up and asks for clarification and the teacher delivers that. For the child, the moment is loaded with “joy and learning” and with the surprise of an adult-like “respect” afforded her by the teacher.

Moving into secondary school, author and academic, Nicholas Jose, recalls the somewhat “Gothic figure” of his senior English teacher, who was both respected and feared:

Mr Schubert had a really deep love of literature. The texts he chose for us were fantastic texts he had a passion for, and, however strange his manner, he was able to convey that passion. He was very sensitive to literature and was always challenging us boys to be responsive as well. He was challenging us to tap into quite powerful forces in our lives, and that was a way of letting us be ourselves....He treated us

absolutely as if we were mature people intellectually. There was no talking down, and so that does lead to a kind of mutual respect. (Metcalf & Game, 2006, pp. 6-7)

As sixteen-year-old boys, we found it incredibly difficult to express what we had inside. If Mr Schubert had been too intimate with us or too informal, I think we would have found it crippling. But by having this formal structure, it allowed us to get past our reserve; if we thought we were doing academic work, we could write about a love poem without becoming paralysed. (Metcalf & Game, 2006, p. 82)

In contrast to the traditional lover of literature that Jose encountered when he was 16, in her interview with Metcalfe and Game, anthropologist and psychotherapist Lesley Devereaux recalls an entirely different senior English teacher in her mid-west American school. He would challenge and engage his students, including those like her younger self who were complacent high-achievers, by destabilising certainties, mobilising curiosity and demanding more open-ended approaches to inquiry than students were accustomed to:

He loved words and loved getting us to think about words. Once, he set a kind of mysterious project which none of us understood – he had given us clues and bits of paper and objects – and I remember giving up on the possibility of getting it right. I was very anxious initially, and annoyed, because I was used to being the top student, but he cut across achievement issues and turned it into a creative undertaking... I don't remember him foisting anything on us, but his love of things kept spilling out, his passions....He came up to me one Friday in class and pushed a book towards me: *I have a feeling you might like this...* He was inviting me to take an interest. Something in his character was saying *Yes*, with a kind of twinkle. And he had a long-term effect. (Metcalf & Game, 2006, pp. 134-135)

These stories draw out elements of relationality between teacher and student that align in particular moments in highly productive ways for the students, who later recall them as emblematic of “life-changing”. In Metcalfe and Game’s analysis across all the data from their interviews, they identify nine “universal themes” or characteristics of outstanding teachers. They are: (1) Changing lives without aiming to; (2) Seeing potential in students; (3) Teaching as a form of love; (4) A passion for learning; (5) The importance of authority; (6) The process of learning; (7) Dialogue as an opening of the mind; (8) Playing a part; and (9) A full life. Teaching is conceived by the authors, Metcalfe and Game, as an “inherently ethical” practice, with respect and care “at the heart of the teaching relation”, learning is mobilised by “pedagogic love” – “a love of learning, a love of the discipline, a love of life” (2006, p. xiii).

This passionate representation of “outstanding teaching” is vastly different from that of current standards discourses as represented by the NPST. For example, the love of the discipline (of language, literature, words) that is marked by Garner, Jose and Devereaux and that infuses the STELLA standards, is reduced in the NPST in 2.1 to the rather flat and dispassionate “knowledge of the content and teaching strategies of the teaching area to develop engaging teaching activities” (AITSL, 2011a, p. 12). In STELLA, the section that is analogous to this “pedagogic love” is to be found not in the domain of Professional Knowledge or Practice but in Professional Engagement, in 3.1: “Teachers demonstrate commitment” and the keywords ENJOYMENT (“How does the teacher model and promote language as a source of curiosity and pleasure?”) and ENTHUSIASM (“How does the teacher demonstrate, and inspire in students, a passion for texts that have personal and cultural significance for them?”). None of

these more affectively oriented qualities (enjoyment, enthusiasm, curiosity, pleasure, inspiration, passion) are apparent in the NPST.

Another striking element in these three narratives is the recognition and respect that the students sense from their teachers – individually when Garner’s teacher takes her question seriously and Devereaux’s offers her a particular book that he thinks *she* will enjoy, “inviting her to take an interest”, or collectively, when Jose appreciates how the formality and intellectual respect of their teacher enabled sixteen-year old boys to “tap into quite powerful forces in our lives” while “letting us be ourselves”. The homogenising standards discourse realised in the NPST loses all nuance and subtlety as it flattens this into 1.1: “Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students” and 1.2: “Understand how students learn” (AITSL, 2011a). In contrast, the STELLA standards invite understanding of these narratives through the keywords INSIGHT (“How well does the teacher know the individual learner and his/ her capabilities?” in Standard 1.1), and RESPECT (“In what ways is the English/ Literacy classroom characterised by dignity and mutual regard?” in Standard 2.2). Through the structure of keywords and questions that intersect and invite inquiry, the STELLA approach to standards is more inviting of inquiry into the relationality that is central to pedagogy.

The second book, the edited collection *My favourite teacher* (Macklin, 2011), collates narratives submitted by from ninety-five Australians. As noted, there is no commentary or interpretation of the data by the editor, and no attempt to draw themes out of it or conclusions from it. The project began as a website in 2009 and the book came out two years after the website was established, supported initially by the industry organisation Teaching Australia. The book incorporates contributions submitted to the website as well as narratives solicited specifically for the book. In the earliest of the secondary school accounts, actor, film-maker and author Anh Do recalls Mrs Borny, his year 8 English teacher at St Aloysius school:

[She] decided us bunch of rejects weren’t hopeless and started to run her own drama classes...even though she’d never taught drama before, she improvised and pretty soon we were doing our own versions of plays and acting games...[She also taught us] how to write it, creating stories from scratch. One day she said to me, ‘Anh, you’re a very talented storyteller’. She had no idea how far that one line of encouragement would take me. (Do, 2011, p. 97)

At around the same stage in her secondary schooling, actor and journalist Wendy Harmer met an English teacher who she also recalls in terms of recognition:

Mrs Collins saw me. That’s what it was. Somewhere among the serried rows of desks she could a glimmer from what I had imagined was deep space. She reflected my flickering light back to me, bright and blinding... [She was] above all, encouraging. Mrs Collins read my essays, poetry, all my writings and I can still, some forty years later, see her signature at the bottom of the page: ‘Nicely done. When can I see more? ...So I wrote more and more and then Mrs Collins wondered if I might like a project? A fortnightly school newsletter and I could be the editor. This was utterly thrilling. (Harmer, 2011, p. 99)

Like many of the other narratives, Harmer’s account is complex and multifaceted. Not only did the teacher convey the sense to the student that s/he was unique but the teacher tied that uniqueness directly to skills within that subject. Once the student

recognises him or herself through the eyes of the teacher as having potential, s/he is more and more productive, beyond the necessities of the subject, and the teacher suggests a new and productive channel for her creative energy. Anh Do and Harmer call this merely “encouragement”, but its intensity is conveyed by the image of the signature still vividly in the mind’s eye, and the phrase “utterly thrilling”. Anh Do returns to Mrs Borny’s classroom decades later with a film crew. This evocation of desire in learning and for learning that their narratives suggest is what Watkins calls “pedagogic desire”, entailing “affective transactions that at one and the same time can cultivate the desire to learn and the desire to teach” (2010, p. 271). The pedagogic relationship is, Watkins argues, premised on “mutuality” and enables “moment[s] of recognition involving at one and the same time a need for acknowledgment and a confirmation of self-worth” (2010, p. 273). Over time, these affectively potent moments accumulate to “foster a sense of self-worth” (Watkins, 2010, p. 273). This is not just for the student, but for the teacher as well. As I have argued elsewhere, the “pedagogical encounter” entails ethical responsibilities that respect difference and arise in particular spatial, temporal and relational configurations, in particular “pedagogical assemblages” (Gannon, 2009, p. 70).

The majority of the English teachers recalled as “favourites” were encountered in the senior years of schooling. Like many of the people in this book, author Irma Gold begins her narrative with the physicality of her teacher, Mrs Turner, before moving on to the literature that she animated for her young student:

...incredible hands...very long and large, but also voluptuous. They swivel at the wrist. Around and around, always moving. Sometimes she wears nailpolish. Her nails flash like tiny peachlights. I am hypnotised...She takes us to see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the Botanic Gardens. Flocks of bats screech and wheel as we sit on the grass watching daylight drop from the sky....We study *The Go-Between*. She makes me live it...But it is not really the book itself. It might instead be *Anna Karenina* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *1984*. Anything really. It’s the way she gets us to see it. To dive in and breath through Leo’s lungs....She organises a literature camp...When I was a small child I started writing my own books, fairy stories mostly but also non-fiction....Looking back is it obvious that I loved words, stories, books from the very beginning but it is not until Mrs Turner that this knowledge emerges as something of a revelation. It’s not the things she says, it is the ways she say them. With passion. It opens me up. (Gold, 2011, pp. 115-117)

In this account, the teacher’s passion for the books and plays to which she is introducing her students is as hypnotic as the swivelling hands with the peach nailpolish that the girl remembers. The passion for literature that she demonstrates is embodied and it is contagious, at least for this student. This is not a teacher who passively facilitates her students’ discovery of canonical literature, letting the language alone cast its spell, but she is an active and forceful agent. Like her hands, which are “around and around, always moving”, her pedagogy is mobilising. She “takes” the students out, she “makes” the girl live it, she “gets” them “to see it”. She incites an embodied engagement with text: “to live it”, “to see it”, “to dive in and breathe”. It is unlikely that the literature will work without the intermediary “passion” of the teacher, and the capacity it has to “open” her students to learning in their English literature class. There is no place in normalising standards discourses to begin to talk about the corporeality of the teacher and her embodied enactment of passionate pedagogy. Whilst Watkin’s work (2010, 2012) gives some clues about how affect and

corporeality carry into pedagogic space, there is no way to talk through these dimensions of teaching in standards-speak, though again STELLA's characterisation of ENJOYMENT, ENTHUSIASM and DEDICATION as keywords indicating STELLA Standard 3.1, "Teachers demonstrate commitment", seem to be better positioned to open the conversation.

Love of literature was a frequent characteristic of many of the English teachers in this book, and they were also recalled for the ways that they extend and challenge the limitations within which their students may otherwise be willing to remain. At his Jesuit boys' school, comedian and television producer Julian Morrow recalls the impact that his new English teacher, also called Ms Borny, had on the class:

It was the first time we'd encountered anyone who suggested that what we'd learned so far was not all there is. Not that it had no value – quite to the contrary – but that nevertheless that it was narrow, limited and in need of a shake up. The reaction of the class was fierce; stunned incomprehension flared into palpable hostility, with the typically dismissive tinge that came with the private school territory. But over time, she won us over; not necessarily to agreement, but to lively, stimulating discussion. Her classes brimmed with enthusiasm, affection (for both the texts and the classroom) and a dynamic, open-minded intelligence....The intersection – by chance – of a teacher, a subject and a group of students had a certain alchemy to it. But it is the genius of the teacher that creates the right atmosphere, and lights the spark. (Morrow, 2011, pp. 148-149)

This narrative is also animated by movements of affect and emotion, though it is initially conflict and hostility directed at the teacher, who demands more of the students than they anticipate. Their "fierce" reaction dissipates as "over time" she wins the class over. We are not given detail of how this transformation was effected, of what strategies Ms Borny took up that changed things. In the narrative it is ineffable, mysterious, arising from "alchemy" and the "genius" of the teacher able to create "the right atmosphere" and light "the spark". Despite its vernacular and romantic appeal, this is not of course the only way to talk about what happened in Morrow's classroom. Watkins' work, for example, would theorise it in terms of "pedagogic desire" and how what she calls the "scholarly habitus" that is required for students to learn most effectively is enabled by the particular pedagogies taken up by the teacher (2010, 2012). The engagement that Ms Borny elicits is not individualised in this account, but it infects the whole class all together. What she does to achieve this general atmosphere of "enthusiasm, affection...dynamic open-minded intelligence" is not clear but it suggests the sort of whole class mobilisation of affect and desire and commitment to learning that Watkins argues is related to active teacher-directed pedagogies, as opposed to more passive student-directed pedagogies (2012, pp. 193-195).

The standards offer limited ways to recognise this sort of impact. This "alchemy" may have to do with Standards 3, "Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning", including the focus areas 3.1: "Establish challenging learning goals", 3.2: "Plan structure and sequence learning programs", 3.3: "Use teaching strategies" and 3.5: "Use effective classroom communication", although these do not represent the dynamism or necessary flexibility, where pedagogy is enacted in the "intersection" of a particular teacher, subject and group of students. Perhaps Morrow's "alchemy" has something to do with the keywords in the STELLA standard 1.3: "Teachers know

how students learn to be powerfully literate”, that does not appear or have an equivalent in NPST. Here we could explore CHALLENGE (“What range of learning opportunities does the teacher provide so that all students are able to achieve optimum success and recognition...?”) and COMPLEXITY (“How deep, complex and connected is the intellectual content encountered by students?”). And it could have something to do with planning, which tends to be invisible to students and therefore unremarked in all these narratives, with STELLA standard 2.1: “Teachers plan for effective learning” and keyword NEGOTIATION (“How does the teacher ensure ...continuing dialogue with students about learning goals, processes, content and outcomes?”). And again it seems to have something to do with Standard 2.2: “Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment” and traces of all the keywords: TRUST, RESPECT, PARTICIPATION, MOMENTUM and PERSISTENCE. And again 3.1: “Teachers demonstrate commitment” where ENJOYMENT, ENTHUSIASM and DEDICATION over time contribute to the transformation of the class. Most likely, it is all of these all together. This was the strength of the STELLA standards, in their capacities to intersect and open up inquiry in a number of different directions at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Although the narratives that were created for the STELLA project and are available on the website (AATE/ALEA, 2002) and the special STELLA double issue of *English in Australia* (2000/2001) were intended to provoke inquiry into practice facilitated by the standards statements, keywords and questions, they can also to be put to work elsewhere. In this paper I have explored and put to work the new *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011a) and the STELLA standards (AATE/ ALEA, 2002), to consider some of the narratives about outstanding English teachers from other sources. As the popular press publications of *Teachers Who Change Lives* (Metcalf & Game, 2006) and *My Favourite Teacher* (Macklin, 2011) imply, as well as frequent media and government attention, there is great interest in the broader population in teacher quality. State and federal governments in Australia have tethered discussions of teacher quality to the mandatory implementation of Professional Standards, which will regulate the profession and whose descriptors will come to serve as proxies for “quality”. These standards are “vernacular variants” (Ball, 2006), of “economies of performance” that have come to circulate globally and that are associated with the creeping of neoliberal managerialism into education and an audit culture that emphasises performance measures of students, teachers, schools and systems (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Stronach, 2010). The STELLA standards demonstrate another more expansive way to “re-locate” professional standards within subject-specific disciplines and within inquiry paradigms that enable collaborative investigation of how good teaching materialises in specific sites of practice. The STELLA project thus opens up the possibility of more fully theorised accounts of pedagogy, accounts that would deepen and extend our understanding of teaching and learning in schools. However this approach to standards is not compatible with the individualised performance management that is likely to be the main focus of the new National Standards.

Good teaching is of great interest to government, the profession, media and the general population, and the call to professionalism that the standards make has had

widespread support. Both the STELLA and NPST standards concur that the teacher is central to improved educational outcomes. However, teacher centrality is differently understood within managerialist discourses, such as those that underpin the NPST framework and demand close monitoring and regulation of teachers, and earlier discourses of professionalism such as those embedded in STELLA, that value teacher autonomy, expertise, altruism and collegiality. There are broader concerns about the effects of the more recent model. For example, Larsen hooks the NPST standards to a “de-professionalisation” of teaching, that individualises, immobilises and isolates teachers as well as obscuring the negative effects of other elements of educational reform agendas (Larsen, 2010, p. 209). She argues that an excessive focus on the centrality of the teacher, which is certainly reinforced by the two books that I have examined in the second half of this paper, is a distraction. Rather, she argues, we need to “re-center our attention to address broader societal contexts within which schools are located, and the complex, messy and contextualised nature of teachers’ work” (Larsen, 2010, p. 29). In focusing on the heroic individual teacher, as I did in following the discursive trajectories of *Teachers Who Changed Lives* (Metcalf & Game, 2006) and *My Favourite Teacher* (Macklin, 2011), issues of relative resourcing and privilege or of social capital, for example, begin to fade out of sight.

This paper argues that contemporary English teachers must not lose the capacity to think through their work – in all sorts of directions – beyond the interpretive grid imposed by the *National Professional Standards for Teaching* (AITSL, 2011a). As Mulcahy argues, the “idiom of teaching standards has become so authoritative that it readily eclipses other ways to think and ‘do’ them” (2011, p. 1). Standards are not neutral or benign. They do not “simply describe pre-existing realities such as accomplished teaching practice or accomplished teachers; they actively produce them” (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 96). In so doing, it becomes difficult for those who are caught within the standards grid to see other dimensions of accomplishment in teaching beyond those that are prescribed by the standards. This includes teacher educators in universities in Australia as our courses are regulated and reshaped to fit the mandated standards. The gaps that are evident between the STELLA standards and the NPST suggest that there is an impoverishment in the new standards regime that obscures crucial elements of practice, including those aspects of affect and relationality that animate and mobilise learning in English (Gannon & Davies, 2007; Gannon, 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Watkins, 2010, 2012), as well as those contextual elements to which Larsen’s (2010) and Mulcahy’s (2011) critiques draw attention to.

The paper aims to undermine the assumption that a “transparent, objective, nationally consistent” (AITSL, 2011) standardised system for describing the work of teachers is possible or sufficient to describe the complex relational and material contexts of teachers’ work. Standards are, as the STELLA developers suggested, sites “for debate, suspicion [and] resistance” with “contentious meanings” for English teachers and the profession more broadly (Doecke & Gill, 2000/2001, p. 7). The paradox under which the STELLA project laboured – “to develop standards which have credibility with all stakeholders...but resist limited forms of accountability” – remains at least as problematic now as it was then (Doecke & Gill, 2000/2001, p. 8). I remain unconvinced about whether teacher accreditation and systems of performance appraisal and reward can be adequately and equitably managed through the current iteration of the NPST scheme. Rather, I suggest that teacher professionalism must continue to be recognised as locally enacted and contingent. Characteristically, and

despite some resonance with the earlier profession-generated STELLA Standards, this “homogenising [of] performance” represented by the NPST is now driven in Australia by policy-makers rather than professionals (Stronach, 2010, p. 68). In a model borrowed from industry, “institutionalised universalistic standards of service delivery” erase as irrelevant any “personal characteristics of the client” (Turner, 1993, quoted in Stronach, 2010, p. 68). These have been challenged elsewhere, for example, by Stronach’s call to “understand and work with localities of learning rather than seeking to over-define and over-specify abstract lists of competence statements”, as occurred in Scotland (2010, p. 121). In Australia, Mulcahy argues the distance of the standards from sites of practice: “they are, *par excellence*, a technology of representation...[like] (for example, book-keeping, cartography) they allow the manipulation of objects and events at a spatial and temporal distance” (2011, pp. 109-110).

The tangential approach that I have taken to my critique of standards discourses through this paper – via the subjective memories of a range of authors celebrating significant teachers in their lives – raises interesting questions about the role of narrative in educational research. Stronach suggests that narrative can counter neoliberal moves in education because it “empowers contradiction and lets history, ethics and desire back in” (2010, p. 172). Narrative invites the contextual detail that homogenising standards discourses tend to overlook. The accounts of influential teachers also operate in a different temporality, reminding us that the impact of effective teachers may not be as evident in the immediate present that standard measures of outcomes favour, but may accrue over time⁶.

In contrast to the flat abstractions of the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011a), the STELLA standards recognised that teachers’ knowledge, experience, skills and values are, in important respects, discipline-specific, and materialise in particular embodied classroom contexts. The validity of the STELLA standards is realised through their grounding in teacher narratives. It may be that the most important component of the *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, in terms of capacity to contribute to more complex understandings of practice, will be the “Illustrations of Practice” that are gradually being uploaded to the AITSL website. Some of these have been authored by AATE and other professional associations, and others have been repurposed from other projects⁷. They include “static” and “dynamic” representations of teachers’ work, including video of classroom practice and interviews with teachers (for example, AITSL, 2011b). The website also invites teachers to upload their own accounts of practice. Potentially the resources on the AITSL website could provide another set of (multimodal) narratives that better reflect the nuances and complexities of classroom practice, and that might be considered alongside the STELLA narratives and other dynamic narrative accounts of good teaching. These could be put to use for more imaginative and powerful collaborative inquiry into classroom practice and the wider elements including socio-cultural, economic and political contexts that impact on this.

⁶ See for example, Cate’s account in Gannon (2012b).

⁷ Such as the *Teaching teachers for the future: Building the ICTE capacity of pre-service teachers in Australian Universities* project developed by the Australian Council of Deans of Education, in collaboration with Education Service Australia and AITSL (TTF, 2012).

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