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CPL Podcast: Professional Teaching Standards K-12

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Tom Alegounarias

INTRODUCTION:
You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:
Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Tom Alegounarias from NESA, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority, and we're talking about teaching standards, how they came to be, and how you can use them in your teaching practice. Tom, welcome.

Tom Alegounarias:
Thanks, Carly. Thanks for having me.

Carly Boreland:
The teaching standards have been around for a while, but in 2018, some teachers are going to be engaging with them for the first time in lots of ways. Can you give us a bit of a background into your experience of the standards, setting them up, and why they mattered, to begin with, and why they still matter now?

Tom Alegounarias:
Gee, it's a big and fantastic question because I don't often get to tell the story. It really begins with an attempt under Minister Chadwick to establish a college of teachers or an institute of teachers. And the idea was to establish an independent authority or an authority that supported teacher professionalism, independently of employers and of the industrial arrangements. It failed to get through to parliament. It wasn't supported by either the Teachers Federation at the time or the Catholic education sectors, and a number of other interest groups didn't support it either. And the fundamental reason it wasn't supported, in the end, in my analysis when I was looking at the policy, was that the references to what constitutes teacher professionalism were unclear. As I was doing that work, a debate was emerging around the world about formal professional standards. I had mixed feelings about it. I believed then, and I believe now, that it is not possible to formally codify what constitutes quality. I also had mixed feelings about the idea of professionalism because I was aware of the politics and the history of the idea that the word "professionalism" is often used really to create sections of privilege and to exclude rather than include.

Counting all of that, and having regard to all of that, I became convinced, as did others, that two things were necessary. We needed to begin building a discussion, a discourse of professionalism. Beyond a

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simple statement that teaching is a profession, we needed to express what constitutes the values that we will protect in the interests of the members of the profession, and in the interests of the community. And that that is, essentially, what constitutes a profession. That is, what are the values, the quality values, that we go out of our way to protect, and we do that in the interest of ourselves and the community, jointly.

So, the next step from that is what are those values? What are those quality values? And while we should all recognise that quality practice cannot be, in some Napoleonic way, put down bit by bit, nonetheless, common reference points for engagement between members of the profession as to what constitutes 'quality' is a crucial step towards building a profession.

So having done that, we then began the work of building the New South Wales Institute of Teachers, and we built it not from declaring the need for some sort of college or institute, but we built it from building a discussion of those standards and engaging the sectors of the profession, unions, professional associations, employers across sectors, etc., in what might be a reasonable expression of what constitutes 'quality' in our practice. Not for the purposes of defining it and limiting it and corralling or, even for the purposes of surveilling individual teachers, but rather as common reference points for ongoing discussion. And that is the foundation of our work here in New South Wales. And, I have to say, it's building up internationally in the same way.

Carly Boreland:
So, it started in New South Wales as the use of shared values described as a point of common reference, and then it's moved into an Australian-wide thing. Well, I think in New South Wales, too, there was the standards described-- there was also some legislation around what it is to be a teacher at the same kind of time?

Tom Alegounarias:
That's right. In establishing the standards and establishing how we would accredit, or recognize, teachers against the standards, we had to, for the first time, define what is a teacher, which was at the time seen as being necessary. But, we recognised it was significant, and as we look back now, it's even more significant, because built into our legislation and protecting us, relative to the rest of the world, is a definition of 'teacher' that makes having teaching qualifications essential; not sufficient but essential. You cannot enter the profession without having recognised teaching qualifications. And, in addition to that, those recognised qualifications are recognised on the basis of assessments made by teachers. So, it's teachers that sit around the group with teacher educators and say, "These qualifications meet the standards, and those qualifications are an essential part of being a teacher." So, once you get a qualification, then you are provisionally, or conditionally, recognised.

Carly Boreland:
Tom, something that I've heard from some teachers who maybe feel a bit cautious, or apprehensive, about professional teaching standards is that they sometimes start out as something that's of the

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profession and supported by teachers, and over time, can gradually morph into something that is less than appealing to teachers. Are there some things going on in New South Wales that are trying to make sure that the standards stay something that are true reflections of the values of our profession, and are used in that way?

Tom Alegounarias:
Look, it's a question of constant vigilance. I've been at the centre of this work in New South Wales and in Australia; I have recently done a lot of work overseas in this area, and I have to say to you, it is a function of the strength of the profession and nothing else. There is a constant tension between describing and articulating what might constitute 'quality' in teaching in the way that we've just said. It's a reference point for accreditation to protect teachers, as a reference point for professional development providers, as part of a continuous discussion on the one hand. And on the other hand, being seen as a potential punitive standard, a tool of surveillance, a tool of containment of the expression of the work of teachers. That will not go away. That is inherent in any description of 'quality' in any profession. The only way to protect ourselves from the toxic dimensions of that work is to be constantly active in controlling and expressing those standards. We are a profession that, frankly, has historically not seen itself as a profession uniformly. Many people do; many people don't. The complete view for profession is when every individual takes responsibility for owning and protecting those standards, in their own interests and in the interest of the community.

So, the dangers that arise from articulating standards of practice are inherent in having the standards. I don't want to walk away from that because when I talk to people, as I have recently, from South America, who fear that an expression of practice will be used in a very oppressive fashion that can't be ignored, when I talk to people from Northern Europe who say, "Look, these are, in the end, creatively limiting because they sat down and worked what constitutes quality, which inherently limits a vision," I don't want to ignore that either, but I will counter-- and I do counter with this. And that is that until you have a shared reference for what constitutes effectiveness in our practice, we haven't got any strength. We haven't got anything to bind us. We haven't got anything to go out there and say, "You know what? This is our value, and this is the way we protect your kids and the community, on the basis of these values. And the only people that understand these values, the only people that can put them into practice, are teachers. And that's our power and our strength."

So, in the end, what happens in New South Wales-- and we've been very, very positive in New South Wales, and in fact, very, very positive nationally, generally, what happens here is the encouragement of activism amongst as many individuals as possible to protect and promote those standards.

Carly Boreland:
So, there's Standards with a capital 'S', the Teaching Standards, and then there's the standards of a professional every day that have to go together? So, we have to walk the walk every single day.

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Tom Alegounarias:
Absolutely. Exactly. You cannot rely on what any bureaucratic (however, consultative) process has created as defining your work. You have to go in and own it. That's your standards. But by the same token, the profession wants to, should, must engage in decisions such as: Who is a teacher? What sort of courses are appropriate for producing teachers? What is the professional development that we want and the professional learning opportunities that we want? What is an outstanding teacher? How do we recognise and celebrate that? And to do that, you need to codify those common points of understanding, and that's what the standards are. They are not our practice.

Carly Boreland:
OK. So, let's get stuck into day-to-day teaching practice then. So, people are going off to school, maybe listening on the way to work. As they are doing that, what can teachers do with the standards, just each day, as a teacher in their practice?

Tom Alegounarias:
Look, the main thing is that you look at them, and you get a sense of the breadth of your responsibility. At the most global level, they remind us that our work includes preparation, which of course, everyone who's ever tried to manage a classroom knows that the preparation was the most important part of the day. But it includes engagement with our colleagues. It includes engagement with a community. The breadth of work that we do, and the interaction of the various dimensions is what's captured in the standards. And when you are in the work on a day-to-day basis, you might end up focusing, understandably, on a particular aspect. But the quality of the work and how easy we can make it for ourselves in any particular aspect is affected and assisted by having an idea of the breadth of that work. The standards don't claim to be, and shouldn't be, a daily reference point. You don't go and say, "Oh, gee, I haven't done 2.16 for a week." What you do is you look at the breadth and say, "Well, this represents a broad understanding." They're also particularly helpful when you're engaging with your colleagues, particularly new teachers, and they're looking for help. They are expressions that you can point to and say, "Look, this dimension here is something that you might want to develop further." Generally, with new teachers, it's far less about theory and understanding and much more about practice and implementation. And you can point to those, and on that basis, you can point to support that might exist for them. So, they're reference points that objectify and keep at an arm's length discussions of what constitutes quality. They don't have to be then personal views, etc. They are objective, common, and understood expressions of practice.

Carly Boreland:
So, it's an opportunity to step back and look at a bigger picture for a moment, perhaps?

Tom Alegounarias:
Absolutely. And what we want is for the profession to use its own outstanding members who are increasingly being accredited and accomplished in leadership. We want those teachers to be the ones

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that are most active in controlling the application of the standards. So, for example, we want more guest, or part-time, lecturers in university courses to be outstanding teachers, to be those that have been recognised as such. We want consultants who are selected to support schools-- we need more of them to start with, but those who are selected to support schools to be those that have been recognised by the profession as being outstanding practitioners, not just those who've managed to meet the interview questions or who've used a line with whoever interviewed them. These are the people that the profession has said are outstanding teachers. We want the mentors to be outstanding teachers. We want those who supervise practicum to be outstanding teachers. And at the same time, we want those who are subject to practicum to have standards to refer to when they're consulting with their senior colleagues.

So you can see in our practices that aren't in our classroom (which is the core of our work)that there's a variety of things that impact on the strength of the profession and how it holds itself together. And, we can be more active in those areas if we use the standards to say, "Look, this is who we think should be doing it, and who we think should be active in those areas," rather than bureaucrats who are administrators or academics or anyone else.

Carly Boreland:
I like that emphasis is on the who as well; focusing on the people and the qualities and capabilities that the individual people have.

Tom Alegounarias:
We need to be a profession that has structures for recognising its own outstanding practitioners and point to them much more, the actual practitioners. Some of them may be academics, or academically inclined, and that's part of the profession, but not all. We need to be practitioners who know who our most celebrated and outstanding members are and, that this is on the basis of a common understanding of what is 'quality', and then we enter the public debates on education on the basis of a confidence that we understand 'quality'. So, all of that goes down to a common expression of what constitutes "quality', which we call standards.

Carly Boreland:
I'm glad you use that word 'confidence'. It's exactly what I was thinking, that teachers should go to work and engage with the bureaucracy, feeling confident that there's no one that knows better.

Tom Alegounarias:
Exactly right. The power and strength that is generated out of a confident understanding that your knowledge and your understanding has a shared basis. It is much more than the necessarily limiting and confined space of a codified set of standards. It's the shared understanding, and the commonality of perspective, that standards can facilitate that not of themselves create.

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MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:
The Centre for Professional Learning offers a wide range of professional learning opportunities all around New South Wales at a fixed rate for members of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. For course information, dates, location, and registration information visit cpl.asn.au.

Carly Boreland:
Tom, when I started teaching, it was in 2006 was my first year as a high school history teacher, and I think that was about the second or third year that people were going through accreditation processes and there was teaching standards. In that time, things have changed quite a bit in the practical ways that people do things and the requirements, and sometimes I think at schools, teachers can feel like they're getting advice from someone that maybe did something five years ago, and it can get a bit out of date and things like that. Can you help us with a teacher, today, who's trying to do something with the teaching standards for accreditation purposes or professional learning or whatever? What's the place to go, and what kinds of support are out there for teachers?

Tom Alegounarias:
I'm glad you've brought up the personal background, because before pointing to NESA and the structures, it's an opportunity for me to highlight, for young teachers especially, how much has changed positively as a result of the standards. My first day of teaching, the head teacher didn't want me because there was a casual teacher that he really liked, a temporary teacher at the time, that he wanted to stay, and he didn't talk to me for three months. And I had to step over a dirty plate on the staff room floor--I'm not exaggerating here, and I'm not saying this to diminish the profession. I'm highlighting, people will know their own environment how things have changed. I can't say that that didn't really influence my view of how things should happen because now, we have mentoring teachers is mandatory. When we set up accreditation, we set it up to necessarily engage teachers in what constitutes quality. Not to define it, but to make sure that people had to discuss it. So, if you're a young teacher going into a school now, you have a right to expect support. You have a right to expect an articulation of what constitutes good work or not, based on a common reference point, based on standards. That will have to happen. There will have to be a report written for you. What you need to do is look at this work and look at the structures that are there to support you. Look at the professional development courses that are endorsed.

Some of the best - I'll take this opportunity; I'm not just saying this - are provided here by the Centre for Professional Learning. And they're some of the best, precisely because, as a membership-based organisation, it really has to go to fine understanding of what teachers really are craving for. Employer-based professional learning courses just don't do that. Someone in the bureaucracy has an agenda; they run that agenda. There's all sorts of complex politics involved but going to providers who have an interest in giving teachers what they need is key, and that has built up because of the professional standards. It didn't exist previously.

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This is a keeper. If you're seeking or required to become formally accredited, you need to understand that the materials you produce should be your normal material. It doesn't have to be outstanding, glittering pieces of artistic expression. They are your normal work. And while the annotations for reports are presented and sometimes felt to be complex, they shouldn't be. They are your thoughts to quickly highlight why the material you're including in your report is relevant. Think of them as yellow stickies attached to the side of your report. They're not meant to be essays. So, if I were to sum up, I would say don't think of it as an external investigation and interrogation. Think of it as an opportunity to just put on the record that you are practising effectively every day. If you are not practising effectively every day, this is not designed as an opportunity to catch you out. Employers, principals, your colleagues, should have called you out a long time ago. A bureaucratic process is not where we take our stand. A bureaucratic process puts it on the record that you're on the books as a teacher, and that's based on a reference to the work you do every day. Not an interrogation and a high jump.

Now, I'll say this as well. In many circumstances, principals are using this process as a way of insinuating standards and expectations that aren't there. Go to the NESA website, go to your representatives, be clear about what's actually required, what NESA requires you to do-- because there are just too many circumstances - they're not frequent, but even one is too many - where people add expectations that aren't actually there. It's not meant to be a difficult and interrogative process.

Carly Boreland:
And we could add that there are courses provided by CPL and, by the Teachers Federation, and lots of others to help people get through accreditation at that initial stage. Schools have processes in place now, too, to work together and help each other. And I suppose your warning is really helpful, that all of that is not supposed to get in the way of your teaching preparation and practice. It's just meant to be a reflection of the good work that you're doing.

Tom Alegounarias:
Just what you'd normally do. I went to our own website recently and tried to look at it with fresh eyes, and said to myself, "You know what? If I were a classroom teacher looking at this, I would feel it's burdensome." It's not because of the nature of the website. It's just inherent in the fact that we're asking for this evidence. And emotionally, that will be burdensome. But try not to think of it that way. Just produce bits and pieces, collect it. You've got plenty of time over time. Collect whatever it is you need to collect, bundle it together, write a couple of quick notes next to it. Be certain that the key part is that your colleagues, your head teacher, or whoever it is that you're working with, their attestation that you are an effective teacher, that you actually are proficient, that's the key part.

Carly Boreland:
And then, I suppose for everyone now, that we're all maintaining accreditation (as of 2018) that's the part where it's your right and responsibility to demand high-quality professional learning and access to things that you need.

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Tom Alegounarias:
Absolutely right. When, again, I go back historically-- I feel like Castro reminding everyone what it was like before the revolution [laughter]. They were all poor. They shouldn't be taken for granted [laughter]. But--

Carly Boreland:
Well, that's kind of nice because often, you get people who talk about the golden years and nostalgically reflect on how much better everything was before.

Tom Alegounarias:
There's some things about the inspectorate we miss - I'll admit to that - but most things were awful. So, let's take professional learning, for example. The landscape was littered with carpet baggers, people who had no idea about anything. If you could develop a metaphor for an educational process, you were on 1,000 bucks a day, just talking about the metaphor. It was not related to substance, and then on top of that, employers and the regional structures would prioritise what the professional learning was. No one need of engage, so that every professional learning process had half the staff room at the back, ignoring it; the half at the front who were part of the decision, enjoying it. Now, in some circumstances, that may not have changed a lot, but we know this. You're now entitled to say what your professional learning needs are, and you're entitled to a discussion about your professional learning needs. Take advantage of that. We also know we've cut out thousands of "providers" who are rubbish, who are just taking money. And they weren't just taking money because they were hopeless. Sometimes they were clever but really just preferred by bureaucracies or individuals rather than the teachers themselves. It was not responsive to what teachers want.

We've cultivated the emergence of a whole range of new professional learning providers like CPL and others, who are out there providing materials that teachers want. So, take advantage of it. But this is a key point. People complain about the number of hours over five years. You know what? Simply participating in the professional learning opportunities will mean you meet those hours. It is not designed to increase the amount of hours you do. Almost all teachers do much more professional learning than the minimum hours required. What they haven't done before is have a reference to what the professional learning is about, why it relates to the standards, and why it relates to them. They were just going to courses, any courses, or having someone pop in. This is an opportunity, and a requirement on others, to ensure that it's relevant. You will all be doing many more hours than those minimum hours over five years actually require of you.

Carly Boreland:
Absolutely. So, this is my third cycle of maintenance of accreditation, and it's never been a problem to get the hours. But maybe it kind of gets you to think a little bit about, "Which things do I need to do?" And maybe I haven't done much in one particular area for a while or-- it kind of gives you that breadth [crosstalk].

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Tom Alegounarias:
Exactly. But also, it should be - and this is where it's not used enough - where a teacher can go to their principal, for example, and say, "You know what? I want more support in this area It's here in the standards. It's required. I want a course supported for this."

Teachers may choose to do it independently, but they can also go to the school and say, "This is how it works for me." And as schools organise their own professional learning agendas, which are generally organised around schools, there's also now a pressure to organise it around the individual teachers, not just the school agenda, which is abstracted, and removed from the needs of teachers. So a school, overarchingly, may have a priority of lifting Year Nine numeracy results or Year Nine language or whatever it might be. That's legitimate and an important part of the work, but at the same time, it cannot exclude the needs of individual teachers in their professional learning that may not align with that specific priority. And every teacher has the right to say, "This is where I want support."

Carly Boreland:
And I suppose it gets schools thinking a bit too, about the variety that they're offering. So, whilst some things are a priority, we don't want that steady and repetitive diet of the same stuff over and over and over again.

Tom Alegounarias:
That's right. And I want to put on the record here that, I don't think that's happening enough. I'm not claiming that it's happening everywhere. What I'm saying is the standards provide the opportunity for that, so we should be taking- the profession needs to be taking - advantage of that.

Carly Boreland:
Some teachers feel, at the moment, I think, there's lots of burdensome tasks at schools that maybe are not helping them to be as effective at teaching the particularly 30 students that are sitting in front of them. Where does the standards fit into all of that, and is there a way for teachers to think about standards that separates them from some of those more administrative-type tasks?

Tom Alegounarias:
It's a really good point. And I have lots of friends who are teachers, and we can have conversations in two streams. One will be, "Yeah, I get it," and the other is, "You have no idea how much we're being asked to deal with. And a lot of this stuff is external to my everyday practice and motivation as a teacher."

I'll say this, that effectiveness cannot, and will not, be determined by administrative processes. Effectiveness cannot, and will not, be determined by external assessments of students, and it will not be determined by theoretical frames of reference, such as standards. In the end, your practice and your effectiveness will be determined by your motivation, those students that you have in front of you, and

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what you'll learn, and how you'll learn from your own colleagues, and what makes your day more rewarding, etc.

So only refer to the standards in the ways that we've said. Don't think about them. They are not intended to be thought about constantly. They're not intended to be a constant burden. I recognise that they do add an element of burden to your life because you have to go through an administrative process, so make the process fit what you do. If, what you do is effective or good for the school and good for the students, and the process fails to recognise that, there's something wrong with the process. That might be us, but it's more likely to be the implementers of the process at school or just outside the school level. But take it up.

Take it up with us. Phone NESA and say, "You know what? My practice is being impeded by the demands being placed upon me," because they are only intended to be external supports. They do not generate or create quality or professional satisfaction. They're only reference points for the profession, as a whole, and for individuals at points of time that they need to be.

Carly Boreland:
Tom, thanks for coming in and shedding some light on how we got to where we're at, and maybe what we need to keep thinking about and doing next. It's been our pleasure having you here, and we'd love to have you back in the future as well.

Tom Alegounarias:
Carly, it's been fantastic. Congratulations on a great initiative.

Carly Boreland:
You've been listening to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. I've been talking with Tom Alegounarias about teaching standards, and how they can be implemented at your school, and where they fit in our teachers' daily work. To find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:
The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Tom Alegounarias **is the Chair of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).**