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Achieving QTS: Secondary trainees' perceptions of standards related to professional values and practice

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Abstract

The Standards for Achieving Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2002) now include a number of statements listed under the heading 'Professional Values and Practice'. This paper presents an analysis of secondary teacher trainees' perceptions of these Standards as a consequence of their school-based and university-based provision in one Initial Teacher Education provider offering the one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education [PGCE]. Data is presented from in-depth focus group interviews conducted with a stratified sample of secondary trainees from Mathematics, History, English and Physical Education. The paper seeks to both appraise trainees' understanding of these Standards and detail the significance these trainees attach to them in both learning to, and qualifying to, teach. Some implications for the training of teachers are shared.



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Introduction

Those of us with an interest in Initial Teacher Education have just completed the first academic year working with the new standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Like many, we at Southampton, have, with our school-based partners, battled hard in making sense of these new Standards, reviewing our course design, scope and sequence, and also considering the systems and strategies which would enable trainees to show evidence that they indeed have met these Standards during their one-year training course.

The arrival of DfEE Circular 4/98 saw the disappearance of general competencies set out within Circulars 9/92 and 14/93 and, instead, heralded the advent of 'Standards' for the award of Qualified Teacher Status, which trainees must meet. Within Circular 4/98, attention to, and mention of, issues related to teachers' professional development, their knowledge of legal responsibilities, and their professional and personal conduct was evident only within the final section of these Standards, under the quite loose title 'Other Professional Requirements'.

Of late, a number of authors have called for a collection of working principles to aid teachers in their professional duties around children (see, for example, Blair, 2002; Halpin, 2000). Indeed, with the publication in 2002 of the *Qualifying to Teach* document (TTA, 2002), came a stipulation from the Teacher Training Agency that trainee teachers in England must uphold the professional code of the General Teaching Council for England in order for recommendation for QTS to go forward.

The new Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2002) comprise three inter-related sections. One of the sections makes explicit a set of outcome statements titled 'Professional Values and Practice' [PVP], which collectively: '...outline the attitudes and commitment to be expected of anyone qualified to be a teacher' (TTA, 2002, p.2). In contrast to Circular 4/98, these PVP Standards are now placed at the very front of the *Qualifying to Teach* document with the intent, one might assume, of communicating a very strong message on the importance of developing teachers-as-professionals through their demonstration of (our emphasis);

- a) *High expectations of learners irrespective of background*
- b) *Treating pupils consistently with respect and consideration,*
- c) *Behaviours that they would expect in pupils,*
- d) *An ability to communicate with parents and carers*
- e) *A contribution to school corporate life*
- f) *An understanding of the role support staff etc play in school life*
- g) *An ability to improve their teaching (via evidence and research)*
- h) *An ability to work within frameworks related to teachers' responsibilities*

Given that the emphasis in Circular 4/98 was on the technicalities of teaching, with professional concerns somewhat relegated to a list of title 'Other Professional Requirements', it is perhaps not surprising that there is a paucity of research that has specifically focused upon the issue of Professional Values and Practice in *learning to teach* and ultimately gaining Qualified Teacher Status. This is in contrast to the research that has looked at issues of professionalism for existing teachers in a range of sectors (for example, Holt & Juraschek, 1998; Hoyle, 1995; Shain, 1998; Troman, 1997).

Recently, Cole (2002) edited a series of chapters that consider each of the eight PVP Standards individually. These chapters comprehensively explain each of the eight requirements and outline in considerable detail how they can be fulfilled. Across all the chapters, ample

practical advice is afforded to trainee teachers to support their preparation for a professional life in teaching. Such advice is to be welcomed, because, as Wright and Bottery (1997) found, when the emphasis in initial training is on the technicalities of teaching (as they were under Circular 4/98), school-based mentors “give heavy emphasis in their training to practical classroom and personal development techniques and issues” but what is missing is “any significant focus on, or conception of, the wider role of the professional teacher beyond these important technicalities shown by the mentor to the new entrant” (*op cit*, 244-245).

In terms of the nature and meaning of professionalism within learning to teach, Oldham (2002) provides a critique of one of the eight outcome statements that comprise PVP in the most recent *Qualifying to Teach* document, specifically Statement 1.7 (TTA, 2002) that trainees are “are able to improve their own teaching ...”, and reveals quite contrasting perceptions help by school- and university-based mentors on the assessment of professionalism. Such contrasting perceptions may not be helpful given the ideas that are at the heart of the UK Government’s 1998 Green Paper ‘Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change’. In this Green Paper, schools of the future are envisaged as needing to become more reflective and more outward looking, constantly seeking to learn how to improve their practice. Similarly, teachers of the future are envisaged as needing to develop a new vision of professionalism at the heart which is the idea of constant self improvement through critical reflection and other forms of professional learning (see Furlong, 2000, for more on this, and on what he sees as the unique role of Higher Education in helping to develop this new professionalism).

All this points to the need for further research specifically focusing on the issue of Professional Values and Practice in *learning to teach* and ultimately gaining Qualified Teacher Status. We are of the view that developing the right people with the right disposition to work with all children is fundamental to continuing the advancement of teaching which is clearly becoming a more complex and difficult profession. Such a view, while perhaps expressed in different terms, would seem to be a generally agreed position held by those who train individuals to teach.

We therefore became interested in these Professional Values and Practice Standards from the point of the trainee. Our access to the literature clearly indicated the ‘voice’ of the trainees has yet to be uncovered. The writing of Maud Blair has also provided a catalyst for our work. She recently wrote:

“Teachers, it is argued, need to work by a set of common principles not only to safeguard their own professional identities but in order to protect children”

Blair, 2002, p.2

If the Standards that relate to Professional Values and Practice are indeed such a set of common principles it would seem sensible to begin to understand the sense that those who are being trained to teach make of these Professional Values and Practice Standards, how they make strides to gather evidence to show they are meeting these Standards and what they view as their significance in qualifying to teach. The purpose of this paper is therefore to present the perceptions held by some secondary PGCE trainees’ of the Standards that relate to Professional Values and Practice as a consequence of their school-based and university-based elements within one Initial Teacher Education provider offering the Postgraduate Certificate in Education located in the South of England.

Method

The Setting: PGCE Course Organisation

The PGCE Programme from which the trainees are drawn consists of six phases. Phase 1 comprises a two-week period of observation. One week is spent in a primary school and a further week spent in a post-16 setting. Trainees arrange these observations during a set period of time and typically enter schools close to their residence prior to arrival at the place of training. A set of tasks are provided by the ITT as the trainees moved through this Phase. Their completion is a requirement of the Course. Trainees arrive at the University for Phase 2, which last for six weeks and includes up to two days in subject-related study/directed study, one day of attention to Professional Themes and two days field experience in the trainee's first placement. These two days include contact with both the subject-based mentor and Professional Mentor within the assigned school. Phase 3 is a 5-week period of student teaching in the same placement school where trainees teach a maximum of 35% timetable. Phase 4 begins after the Christmas break. This Phase again includes up to two days in subject-related study/directed study, one day of attention to Professional Themes and the Special Study (which is a small piece of action research undertaken by the trainee) and two days field experience in a second placement. Phase 5 consists of 12-weeks student teaching on a 50% timetable. Phase 6 comprises a combination of university-based and school-based work, the submission of final summative assignments, and the completion of the Career Entry and Development Profiles etc.

Participants

A description of the purpose of this study was outlined to the trainee teachers in three secondary subjects (History, Mathematics and Physical Education) by members of the research team. Volunteers were then sought from the 2002-2003 cohorts (History, N= 15; Mathematics, N= 27; and Physical Education , N=29. Following this invitation, three participants from each subject agreed to participate in the study. The nine trainees (five males and four females) from this stratified sample were then assigned to one of three mini-focus groups. It was decided that each subject would be represented within each of the groups.

These nine trainees had completed their school placements across an array of settings (all-boys, mixed gender, city and non-city schools) in schools with differing degrees of challenge within a number of different education authorities. They had achieved a range of summative grades (from satisfactory to very good) on their school placements. The trainees were of differing marital status, were from across the age-range and included some coming directly from undergraduate study, some from time in other professions or from raising a family.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, data were collected using the following techniques;

- a) Mini focus group interviews,
- b) Document analysis.

Focus groups Data were collected from the participants using a semi-structured mini-focus group interview format (Kreuger, 1988). With the research question very much in mind, prior to data collection the research team independently developed a list of potential interview questions. The team then met formally to consider the respective questions on the basis of their content and appropriateness and possible sequence. A first draft of an 'interview protocol' was developed by the first author. This draft was then circulated amongst the research team for final approval and comment. No comments were received and the interview schedule was agreed.

The Secondary PGCE trainees were then interviewed at the University in PGCE subject work-bases approximately one week before the conclusion of their PGCE course. With the consent of all of the trainees all interviews were audio-taped for transcription purposes. All interviews lasted approximately 35-45 minutes.

The purpose of the interview was fourfold:

- a) To allow trainees to share their understanding of the cluster of Standards known as 'Professional Values and Practice',
- b) To allow trainees to outline the significance they assigned to these Standards during their period of training,
- c) To enable the trainees to describe the steps they took to gather evidence to show they were meeting these Professional Values and Practice Standards, and,
- d) To enable the trainees to indicate the extent to which attention to these Professional Values and Practice Standards made them feel differently about their role as a teacher.

The interview schedule is shown in the Appendix.

Document Analysis Trainees provided an anonymous copy of a one-page record sheet from their Secondary Trainee Assessment Record (STAR) document where they recorded their claims for meeting the Professional Values and Practice Standards across the training year. These claims are typically in the form of cross-references to where evidence of their attainment can be found (lesson plans, lesson observations conducted by mentors etc). Access to these record sheets would enable some appraisal of both the scope and range of sources accessed in order to support claims for satisfying the requirements associated with each of these Standards.

Data Analysis

Data gathered from the mini focus group interviews were analysed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Repeated examinations of the data summarised segments of the data into preliminary categories (Merriam, 1998). Based upon a comparison of the categories, a number of major themes emerged (Patton, 1990). Care was taken to ensure all emerging themes were supported by the data while non-discriminate cases were also noted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the interpretation. The data were also cross-checked to verify findings from more than one source.

Trainee record sheets were analysed and sources of evidence for the PVP Standards were uncovered.

Findings

At interview the trainee teachers discussed their views on, and experiences with, the Standards related to Professional Values and Practice in a variety of ways. The following themes emerged:

Necessary and appropriate

All of the trainees endorsed the inclusion of the Standards that relate to Professional Values and Practice, as the following comments from two of the trainees illustrate:

They [the PVP standards] are there to improve teaching, to get a level of teaching that all teachers should be at as a minimum and then build on that to weed out the ones that are not professional...because you are developing the children morally and socially as well as within your subject area.

If you are going to be a teacher then you need to be professional. While I think that you are going to do that anyway, it is good to look down and see if they do address all the important issues of being a good teacher...you know, being fair to everybody, to include everybody...taking individual personal needs in account and being able to work with other colleagues on different levels... and outside agencies...having high expectations is important, they [pupils] will give you better results so it pays dividends.

There was reasonable agreement that these Standards went well beyond the classroom and thus should not be restricted to solely to what happens in lessons. One trainee explained:

They [the PVP standards] almost relate to an unwritten rule about teaching that, as well as teaching the subject, you should almost take on some moral responsibility as well...for instance you might have taught a fantastic lesson and then at lunchtime you see two children during an incident of bullying and do you turn a blind eye? No, you get involved and try and address this behaviour too.

It's me, who I am, what I am and how I get along!

Trainees typically concurred that much of their ability to meet Standards relating to Professional Values and Practice was, in some way, down to their own values and beliefs about children and schooling. As one put it "it is being a role model...they [children] spend so much time with you that you cannot but leave a lasting impression on them". Consequently many believed they could measure up to the task of meeting these Standards even prior to entry to the Course:

I knew I was doing these things...I mean, I knew I was always professional. I get organised and try and get involved in as much as I can...I was not worried about these [PVP Standards] as it is more of a case of how you are as a person. I think that if you are going into this profession I think you already have in yourself many of these things in terms of kids etc.. and we do it anyway.....

The trainees also conceptualised these Standards from the point of 'relationships'. An ability to 'connect with others' was also raised, as one trainee remarked:

It's mainly about relationships that you make with the staff and with the pupils and how it differs and how you can separate the two. It is about relationships. They [the PVP standards] act as a guideline really for teachers which lays out for teachers what they are supposed to be doing in the classroom and in the school.

In some instances trainees considered these relationships fundamental to developing the traits of an effective teacher. As one trainee stated:

You can have the knowledge and understanding and have the management and the best organisation and planning... but if you cannot relate to people and get on with pupils then you are not going to be a very successful teacher.

A common message revealed by the trainees was that, while the development and sustaining of appropriate professional 'relationships' with staff and pupils were viewed as a

priority within their placement schools, at times, particularly during the first placement, this message somewhat clashed with other concerns they had:

In the first [placement] school you are more worried about the basics, like not forgetting the work you are going to do with them and getting them sorted out...but then you can worry more about these things [like PVP] with time and experience.

A reason to intervene

While trainees claimed their ability to show evidence of meeting the Standards related to Professional Values and Practice was, in a large part, down to their own belief systems and ways of behaving in schools, they were also of the view that the importance of these particular Standards would be fore-grounded more if they were *not* showing such evidence. The following comment illustrates:

I think it would only become a problem when someone was not doing this [having Professional Values and Practice]. That is, where the mentors and other teachers would have to pick up on them. We have come in with them already; we may not have them in those exact words though.... As a training teacher I was trying to do them [the PVP standards] anyway without thinking about them so I did not necessarily look at the sheet that much until I thought 'what went wrong?'.....

The setting of targets for trainee development was more common on issues related to teaching, management, planning and assessment and was rarely on aspects of the Standards related to Professional Values and Practice. The following trainee indicated the reason for her:

You were not always thinking about them. I did not go into a lesson saying I am going to be really professional today [sarcastically].....you just did it without thinkingI did not go through the day thinking I have to achieve Standard 1.3 today, but I spent more time thinking about how I was going to do my assessments...but then I looked back and said 'I have been doing that.

While Standards related to Professional Values and Practice did not always appear at the forefront of this trainees' mind, they did appear, in this case, to serve as a reassurance that indeed the right things were being accomplished.

Made me better!

It was evident from the transcripts that trainees saw value in these Standards in terms of their alleged impact upon the quality of their teaching, how they thought about their teaching with a view to improving it, and when observing the teaching of others. The remarks that follow are indicative of these three points:

I have thought about them [PVP Standards] when teaching or when you have had a bad lesson or a bad week...they help me look at my week and my lessons and also help me focus upon what I should be doing.

Another outlined:

For reflection...when reflecting upon lessons ... it is good to have these things [PVP Standards] to look back on and actually see where things may have gone wrong. Your lesson observations will show if you have met these things...I think these [PVP Standards] are so important...it covers so many different things like the diversity, the equality, and treating all the pupils the same. Sometimes that is quite hard to do in a lesson so I think that it is good to reflect upon those things after your lesson.

While a third mentioned

It [PVP Standards] helped me look when observing other teachers and seeing 'well if they are a good teacher, why are they a good teacher...what can I emulate and what can I aspire to?...it points out what are some of the other qualities of a good teacher.

Finding evidence...having confidence in it and aiming for consistency....

Many trainees pointed to their difficulties in gathering evidence in relation to the Professional Values and Practice Standards to then be recorded within their record document:

I found it quite hard at the end to evidence these PVP Standards beyond observation. I put much emphasis upon what they [other teachers] said. It was much harder to go and prove that you had done these things. You could only do it in light of what others had said about you.....I found it hard to document personally that I had good relationships with pupils.....I relied on others saying so.

In effect, the trainees believed that Standards that referred explicitly to relationships with pupils required a 'third party' in making judgements:

You need a variety of people observing you so that you can get a consensus as to how you are performing.... What one person might think is a good relationship, someone else might not agree with so it could be more subjective.

It seemed as if some trainees were not always clear as to whether they had in fact demonstrated some of the Standards. When addressing the issue of respecting pupils, one trainee remarked:

You don't necessarily know how you have treated somebody until somebody afterwards says something like 'well, you said that a bit strong'

If evidence was presented, the content set out within some Standards (such as that which speaks to interaction with other support staff) seemed difficult to grasp and record from the point of demonstrating and achieving some consistency in meeting the Standards. As one trainee commented:

You could have the discussion with the SENCO or attend a meeting and you could get access to IEP's etc...what I found hard was to put in evidence that I was doing this consistently. Anyone can go and get a file and say that they have done it [read a policy]...it was hard to evidence some of these unless you had this written in a lesson observation

On a few occasions trainees shared their difficulties in understanding what the mentor comment meant:

They [mentors] would write general comments like 'she is confident' but then I had to go through and see what Standard or Standards they relate to.

Whereas another offered the following perspective:

They [the PVP Standards] are distinct...I think all the other targets and Standards are about teaching and others, the PVP, are almost a given..... they are more about being natural whereas the others are things that you can improve.

Trainees viewed the degree of involvement in certain school events as one factor which explained their confidence and ability to convince and, as they put it, prove they had met some Standards. One trainee spoke to the Standard which refers to communication with parents:

Some [QTS Standards] are very difficult to prove you have done them...I mean, the first parents evening I went to was a year 7 and I could not contribute because I had only just started teaching, but it did help me get to know the people a bit better... but on the second parents evening which was in May with my year 10 class I could contribute quite a lot to the parents evening..... so I could provide more evidence in the second one...but it still needed the person there to write something about this...

Being assessed

It was clear from the trainees that the techniques used by their school-based mentors to support the assessment of Standards related to Professional Values and Practice were more similar than different. One trainee detailed their experience:

Assessment was through lesson observations with comments...they [mentors] would not necessarily write down how to work better with pupil 'X'...so it was lacking there and they [mentors] did not really expand there. However, the discussions that followed the lesson helped more....

Trainees indicated that in most instances notes jotted on a piece of paper normally included something related to Professional Values and Practice, but when it came to a tick-box instrument, there were no comments.

From an analysis of their record sheets, the manner in which evidence was gathered seemed similar amongst the trainees (for example, there was heavy emphasis upon direct observation and also contact with specific support staff). However, differential attention to the importance of the Standards related to Professional Values and Practice was apparent across schools. One trainee stated:

In my school they had like a tick-box sheet. They did not really address PVP, they just sort of ticked it off as good or whatever...the knowledge and understanding [Standards] and so on was more thorough...PVP was almost something that we did along the way as everything else was more important.

Whereas another revealed:

It was more the other way round with me. Like how you interacted with the pupils, are you including everybody, how you are differentiating and how you are conducting

yourself...even the level of your voice. They [the staff at my school] thought that getting those things right was important

Others warned of possible subjectivity in making judgements:

In that maybe this [the possible subjectivity] is more so with PVP in that they [mentors] might say 'what is that one'?... oh, yeah, you have done that one...It clearly can be down to a matter of opinion...I don't think they [the school-based mentors] really understood them.

Discussion & Conclusions

A strong endorsement for the Professional Values and Practice Standards was evident from the 'voices' of these trainees. Trainees on the whole saw these Standards in some way contributing to the development of their instructional effectiveness and were on the whole, as one put it, a "good thing"

While the trainees deemed these Standards necessary and did not dispute their content, naturally the different contexts in which these trainees worked made some of the Professional Values and Practice Standards more relevant than others (e.g. those who worked in schools with greater ethnic diversity, or had schools with greater numbers of pupils with individual and specific needs).

Trainees did identify problems to do with the gathering of evidence. The potential for differences in opinion about their work seemed less to do with their own assessment of their ability to meet these Standards and more to do with a possible lack of attention given to these Standards by some mentors in some schools and perhaps the lack of understanding of these Standards by these mentors.

It would appear that operating within a system that demands 'evidence' gave rise to some difficulties, and perhaps some anxiety and uncertainty, for the trainees in their efforts to offer either the 'right' or what might be the most appropriate and convincing evidence – to enable, as one trainee communicated, defensible proof that these Standards had indeed been achieved.

Some trainees reported an absence of any comments related to Professional Values and Practice or at best only implicit comments. The lack of detailed feedback from their school-based mentors and what seemed differential attention to these Standards in some schools served in part to only compound the situation.

On reflection, explicit detail on the ways in which the trainees were including pupils, promoting positive values and demonstrating positive expectations for all would have provided useful feedback to deepen their understanding of these Standards and also further support their overall progress. Clearly, this is an issue for some providers working with their school-based partners.

The trainees had problems in demonstrating 'consistency' when, in their minds, some of the Professional Values and Practice Standards made reference to experiences that could be viewed as less frequent or day-to-day, or perhaps supplementary to what they or their mentors may have deemed more critical (such as, for example, developing subject knowledge, improving their planning, assessing learning). Greater attention is needed in helping trainees

realise how conversations with other support staff and professionals can be assimilated and then become noticeable in their teaching.

It would appear that the Professional Values and Practice Standards have, to some extent, offered a set of guidelines for these trainees that have been interpreted quite similarly by them.

These trainees were, however, convinced that they indeed did possess the right character and disposition to the extent that these Standards were in their minds 'a given'. According to the trainees, difficulties would arise more if they were not attending to these Standards and, as one claimed, he would have behaved no different in their absence. However, some trainees admitted only referring to them if a problem emerged in a lesson or when seeking a little reassurance.

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Appendix

Professional Values and Practice Focus-Group Interview Questions

1. The Standards that relate to Professional Values and Practice, what are they all about?
2. Why do you think there are Standards that relate to Professional Values and Practice listed within the 'Qualifying to Teach' document?
3. To what extent have these PVP Standards helped you become an effective/a better teacher?
4. What attention was given to Professional Values and Practice;
 - during the university-based component of your PGCE?
 - during the school-based component of your PGCE?

What messages did you receive relative to the importance of these Standards from;

- the university?
 - your placement schools?
5. What evidence did you attempt to provide in an effort to meet these PVP Standards? Give some examples?
 - Any difficulties in gaining this evidence? If so what were they?
 6. Did you undertake specific tasks in relation to PVP across your PGCE year? If so:
 - Who set them at the University and what were they?
 - Who set them in your placement schools and what were they?
 7. How conscious were you of these PVP Standards when you were teaching your classes during school experience?
 - Provide an example?
 8. How were you assessed in relation to these Standards within your placement schools?
 - What are your thoughts on the method/appropriateness of this assessment?
 9. In your opinion do they communicate the right values and practices for a beginning teacher?
 - Why? Or why not?
 - Should anything else form a part of this section of the Standards?
 10. To what extent have these Standards made you think differently about your role as a teacher?
 11. Is there anything else you wish to add on the issue of Professional Values and Practice?