

# PROFESSIONALISM, IDENTITY, AND THE THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF THE DEAF

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## ABSTRACT

The National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf (NAATD) identified a need for the specialist skills and knowledge of their members to be recognised within the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Frameworks. A decision was made to update the NAATD guiding documentation to use the same format and language as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Professional Standards for Teachers. To guide this work, 231 Australian Teachers of the Deaf (TOD) and 25 mainstream teachers identified the key values and beliefs of each profession. Groups shared similar values but differed in their specialist skills and knowledge. In response to this new knowledge, NAATD developed the National Standards of Teachers of the Deaf.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing trend amongst Australian health practitioners to define and develop standards of professionalism in their fields (Aguilar et al., 2013). Prior to 2011, standards designed to outline the work of educators were "not universally agreed or understood and open to many interpretations" (Evatts, 2011, p406). At this time, each state and system in Australia used a different measure to evaluate performance. Teacher standards described the degree of competence expected at entry level to the profession and were used to measure ongoing performance (Sachs, 2012).

In 2008, the Australian government moved towards standardising education across Australia and established the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The first task of ACARA was to establish the National Assessment Plan- Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). NAPLAN assesses reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy for students in Years 3,5,7 and 9. Special provisions and adjustments can be provided within NAPLAN for students with disabilities. The second task for ACARA was to develop a National Curriculum, implemented across Australian schools in 2014. This National Curriculum allows for special provisions and reasonable adjustments for children with disabilities.

Alongside the work of ACARA, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) developed the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers which were launched in January 2012. The AITSL Professional Standards "define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st-century schools..." (AITSL 2013). The introduction of these standards means that teachers across all education sectors in Australia are required to provide evidence of their practice competence against these standards. The mechanism for this is the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework which requires each teacher to meet with his or her principal or delegate for "regular, appropriate and constructive feedback on their performance, opportunities to identify areas for development, as well as effective and ongoing support to further improve their practice" (AITSL 2015).

While the current Australian curriculum and assessment frameworks recognise the individual needs of students with disabilities, the AITSL Professional Standards do not recognise the specialised professionals who work directly with these students. The concern of various specialist educator lobby groups is that the AITSL Professional Standards describe the teaching profession rather than reflecting on the skills and knowledge of individual teachers and that they reflect a belief that all teachers engage in the same homogenised and undifferentiated view of the education process. In contrast to this standardised view of the teaching profession, some organisations of educators who work with children with diverse needs have developed their own standards.

The NAATD Minimum Competencies detail the skills and knowledge of TODs but are vague about professional values and beliefs- a key indicator of professionalism (Ajjiwi

&Higgs 2008). Definitions and standards of professionalism outline the core values and beliefs and assist in the promotion of a sense of identity within an occupation (Ajiwi &Higgs 2008). Evatts (2011)lays out definitions for organisational professionalism and occupational discourse. "Organisational professionalism"(p 408) explains hierarchical structures, work procedures and practices. This discourse establishes accountability measures and external regulations to manage staff. This mechanism is reflected through the measures within the National Curriculum, NAPLAN reporting and the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework.

Discussion about professionalism by practitioners is referred to as "occupational discourse"(Evatts 2011, p407). This discourse is democratic in nature, based on autonomous and discretionary judgement within the profession and involves collegial authority rather than that of an employing authority.Position and Policy statements developed through this mechanism are more likely to be adopted by the field and were used to develop the Minimum Competencies and current National Standards for Teachers of the Deaf documents.

## **METHOD**

The NAATD National Executive Committee spent two days developing adraft Standards for Teachers of the Deaf. The group reviewed the AITSL National Standards to identify the skills and knowledge that TODs bring to their roles in addition to their mainstream peers. The draft Standards were emailed to the 297 members of NAATD in November 2013 with a request for submission of comments. No feedback was received by January 2014. Tenfocus groups were conducted around Australia between February and May 2014. A total of 231 NAATD members participated in a number of face to face workshops (6) and web conferences (4). There were 162 participants at the face to face workshops (held in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Canberra and Sydney). There were 69 participants in the online sessions (held in Western New South Wales, Northern New South Wales, Tasmania and Northern Territory).

Focus groups began with an introduction to professionalism and professional standards. The audience was then challenged to describe the identity of a TOD, and to reflect on how well they felt their mainstream peers understood this identity. Participants located the values and beliefs identified by the Australian Occupational Therapy Committee (Aguilar et al., 2013) (see Table 1) within three categories according to their perceived relationship to education:

- 1) Unique to TOD
- 2) Relevant to both Mainstream and Specialist TOD
- 3) Irrelevant to both Mainstream and Specialist TOD.

Each focus group then spent time reviewing the Draft Standards for Teachers of the Deaf to ensure that they truly represented their specialist skills and knowledge and providing written feedback. Once all sessions were complete, the response sheets were collated into an Excel spreadsheet. The NAATD National Executive Committee discussed each standard against the feedback during three separate teleconferences and one face to face meeting to finalise the document.

In addition to NAATD members who participated, 25 mainstream teachers were invited to complete the same activity using an online Lime Survey tool to examine similarities and differences between the professional identity beliefs of mainstream teachers and TODs.

## **RESULTS**

The development of the National Standards for Teachers of the Deaf involved reviewing the AITSL National Standards to identify the skills and knowledge that TODs bring to their roles in addition to their mainstream peers. For many of the Standards, this involved listing specialist knowledge in areas such as anatomy, classroom acoustics, audiological management, speech and language development and communication modalities. Other Standards were extended to highlight the impact of hearing loss on a student's engagement across the range of curriculum areas.

The Values and Beliefs statements from the Aguilar et al article (2013) were examined and divided into thematically similar groups by the author. These groups and the relevance of each Value/Belief to the group were discussed with another researcher with extensive experience as a specialist educator. Discussion continued until there was consensus as to the themes under which each Value and Belief belonged. The categories were: A) Importance of the Profession, B) Competence, C) Personal Attributes, D) Ethical Practice and E) Client Centredness. While the majority of responses were the same between the TODs and Mainstream Teachers, there were some areas in which differences were identified. The full set of results are located in Table 1.

For *Importance of the Profession*, 'longevity in the role' demonstrated the largest difference of opinion. More TODs (69%) felt that this was irrelevant than did mainstream teachers (40%). For *Competence*, only 'facilitating client engagement and participation in the community' demonstrated any notable differences of opinion. All the mainstream teachers (100%) believed that they engaged in this activity while 20% of TODs felt that this was a unique value.

For *Personal Attributes*, there were mainstream and TOD participants who believed that 'compassion' (TOD 4%, MT 10%), 'empathy' (TOD 4%, MT 10%) and 'hope and optimism' (TOD 9%, MT 10%) were irrelevant. Some TOD participants listed 'lateral thinking' (9%) and being 'non-judgemental' (10%) as irrelevant.

For *Ethical Practice*, there were large numbers of mainstream and TOD participants who identified 'working in the community' as irrelevant to their role (TOD 22%, MT 20%). Smaller numbers identified 'openness' as irrelevant to their role (TOD 11%, MT 10%). 10% of mainstream teachers did not include Human Rights among their professional values while 2% of TODs identified this as a unique value.

For *Client Centredness*, a number of attributes were identified as being unique to the role of TODs by both populations: 'advocating for client' (TOD 15%, MT 10%), 'autonomy and independence of the client' (TOD 9%, MT 9%), 'flexibility with clients' (TOD 11%, MT 10%) and 'facilitating change in the client and their circumstances' (TOD 13%, MT 10%). 'Empowerment of the client' was identified as a unique attribute by 18% of TODs while 100% of mainstream teachers listed this as relevant to all teachers. 'Passing knowledge onto the client' was identified as irrelevant by 10% of mainstream teachers and 4% of TODs.

This is also a category that reflected the largest diversity among TODs. While 15% noted that to 'Advocate for the Clients' was unique to their role, 10% felt that it was irrelevant. 9% believed that 'Autonomy and Independence of the client' was a unique value of their role and 7% felt that it was irrelevant. 13% listed 'Facilitating change in the client and their circumstances' as unique and 7% listed it as irrelevant.

While there is great diversity in the results when they are reviewed in this way, the audiences of each focus group voiced their conclusion that they share the values and beliefs of their mainstream peers and that it was their specialist skills and knowledge that differentiated them. Each group used the available time to conduct focused reviews of the National Standards for Teachers of the Deaf statements and the final document truly reflects the opinions of the majority of TOD professionals in Australia.

## DISCUSSION

There were a number of results that indicate the differing landscape for TODs when compared to their mainstream peers. The difference in results for the attribute of 'longevity in the role' may be attributed to the fact that currently, the only way to achieve a specialist TOD qualification in Australia is through post graduate study. A teacher may have worked in mainstream settings for a number of years prior to completing the secondary TOD qualification and so, while being a very qualified educator, is new to this particular role. They bring their previous experience with them to this role so cannot be considered a beginning teacher.

There also appears to be some confusion around the term 'community'. In *Ethical Practice*, the attribute of 'Working in the Community' received high scores for being irrelevant to their role by both populations (TOD 22%, MT 20%). Given that 20% of TODs noted

'facilitating client engagement and participation in the community' as their unique characteristic, this may indicate that each group classifies 'community' differently. Some of the TODs in the study work with students who are already part of or seek to be part of the Deaf community and this may be how they read 'community' in this instance. It may also be a reflection that many TODs work in itinerant roles and part of the support they provide is facilitating engagement between the student with hearing loss and both the classroom and the wider education population- a task that the mainstream teachers may see as the work of the TOD they work with. This needs to be explored in more depth with participants in both the mainstream and TOD groups through qualitative analysis in a future study.

The results suggest that some of the participants maintain a clear distinction between their personal and professional lives. *Personal Characteristics* highlighted a range of attributes deemed as irrelevant to the profession by both groups. This was supported in *Ethical Practice* with 'openness' being listed as irrelevant by 11% of TODs and 10% of mainstream teachers. These participants may feel this attribute is referring to how much of their own lives are included in discussions or as teaching points but without further investigation this is speculative.

The final category of *Client Centredness* reveals a wide range of understandings about the role and responsibilities of TODs. Both groups identified a number of attributes unique to TODs: 'advocating for client (TOD15%- MT 10%)', 'autonomy and independence of the client' (TOD9%- MT 9%), 'flexibility with clients' (TOD11%-MT 10%) and 'facilitating change in the client and their circumstances' (TOD13%- MT10%). This may reflect a perception of the influence a TOD over individual and classroom programs.

This attitude may also explain why 18% of TODs identifying 'empowerment of the client' as a unique attribute compared to 100% of mainstream teachers listing this as a shared value. The itinerant TODs and mainstream teachers may see this as part of the itinerant TOD role when working individually with a student or when liaising with a school support team. The attribute of 'passing knowledge onto the client' was identified as irrelevant by 10% of mainstream teachers and only 4% of TODs. This also needs further exploration.

This category also reflected the largest diversity among the TOD population. While 15% noted that to 'advocate for the Clients' was unique to their role, 10% of their peers felt that it was irrelevant. While 9% believed that 'autonomy and independence of the client' was a unique value of their role, 7% felt that it was irrelevant. Similarly with 'facilitating change in the client and their circumstances', 13% felt that this was a unique value while 7% felt it was irrelevant. This may reflect the many roles of a TOD when supporting students in school settings. Some have direct responsibility for students in small group settings and others share responsibility in an itinerant role.

The results of the values and beliefs activity indicate that TODs share differing ideas about their roles and may not fully understand the diversity of responsibilities they may be asked to fulfil depending on their professional placement. Explicitly outlining the specialist skills and knowledge of TODs in the National Standards for Teachers of the Deaf can be used to guide discussions with school principals and employment organisations about the work they do in their current role and highlight skills and knowledge they might need if their role changes.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The National Executive presented the National Standards for Teachers of the Deaf to AITSL in January 2015. AITSL have shared that they cannot adopt the National Standards of Teachers of the Deaf document as a whole but are willing to work with the NAATD National Executive to translate them into a format that AITSL are willing to share with the wider education community (AITSL, personal communication, January 16, 2015).

Demonstrations of proficiency for specialist educators can now be based on clearly documented skills and knowledge that relate to their role as a TOD rather than the generic AITSL Professional Standards. Discussions around the elaborations will identify each individual's professional strengths and areas that require additional continuing professional

education. It is anticipated that the elaborations will enable a manager and teacher to confidently review their progress each year and plan for their ongoing development.

A final positive outcome of this work is the significantly heightened sense of community and the need for greater clarity around the roles and identity of TODs in Australia. The focus groups have led to ongoing discussions and enabled managers to clearly map the progress and ongoing learning needs of their teams. The majority of Australian Teachers of the Deaf contributed to this work and it has been a powerful uniting mechanism.

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Table 1  
*Values and Beliefs Results*

	TODS			Mainstream		
	Irrelevant	All Teachers	TOD	Irrelevant	All Teachers	TOD
<b>A: Importance of Profession</b>						
1. Longevity in role	69%	29%	2%	40%	60%	0%
2. Membership to NAATD	13%	13%	73%	0%	0%	0%
3. Empowerment of Profession	5%	80%	16%	0%	100%	0%
4. Having pride in who we are and what we do	4%	93%	2%	0%	100%	0%
<b>B: Competence</b>						
1. Facilitating client engagement and participation in the community	7%	73%	20%	0%	100%	0%
2. Competent practice	0%	98%	2%	0%	100%	0%
3. Reflective practice	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%	0%
4. Maintaining and extending professional knowledge	0%	96%	4%	0%	100%	0%
5. Evidence based practice	2%	96%	2%	0%	100%	0%
<b>C: Personal Attributes</b>						
1. Compassion	4%	96%	0%	10%	90%	0%
2. Perseverance	4%	93%	2%	0%	100%	0%
3. Lateral thinking	9%	91%	0%	0%	100%	0%
4. Good communicator	0%	98%	2%	0%	100%	0%
5. Empathy	4%	91%	4%	10%	90%	0%
6. Creative problem solving	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%	0%
7. Hope and optimism	9%	87%	4%	10%	90%	0%
8. Non judgement	7%	93%	0%	0%	100%	0%
<b>D: Ethical Practice</b>						
1. Team based practice	2%	93%	4%	0%	100%	0%
2. Respect and support for colleagues	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%	0%
3. Respect for peoples language, culture	0%	93%	7%	0%	100%	0%

and views							
4. Working in the community	22%	71%	7%	20%	80%	0%	
5. Human rights	0%	98%	2%	10%	90%	0%	
6. Ethical practice	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%	0%	
7. Belief in people and their potential	2%	98%	0%	0%	100%	0%	
8. Confidentiality	0%	98%	2%	0%	100%	0%	
9. Integrity	4%	96%	0%	0%	100%	0%	
10. Openness	11%	89%	0%	10%	90%	0%	
<b>E: Client Centred</b>							
1. Advocating for client	10%	76%	15%	0%	90%	10%	
2. Fairness and equality for the client	12%	84%	5%	0%	100%	0%	
3. Accepting of the things that matter to families	2%	93%	4%	0%	90%	10%	
4. Autonomy and independence of the client	7%	84%	9%	0%	90%	10%	
5. Empowerment of the client	0%	82%	18%	0%	100%	0%	
6. Passing on knowledge to client	4%	84%	11%	10%	90%	0%	
7. Flexibility with clients	0%	89%	11%	0%	90%	10%	
8. Facilitating change in the client and their circumstances	7%	80%	13%	0%	90%	10%	
9. Valuing client information	0%	91%	9%	0%	100%	0%	
10. Client safety	2%	96%	2%	0%	100%	0%	
11. Honesty towards clients	4%	89%	7%	0%	100%	0%	