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It's okay, I'm a...teacher. Is professional status important to teachers?

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# IT'S OKAY, I'M A...TEACHER. IS PROFESSIONAL STATUS IMPORTANT TO TEACHERS?

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## Abstract

Teacher accountability and the debate around teacher quality are issues of international importance. As society places increasing demands on the teaching profession, and regulatory bodies around the globe raise the 'standards' for teachers to adhere to, the professional status of teachers is drawn into focus. This paper reports research findings of an investigation into the perspectives of professional status of teachers, held by pre-service teachers about to embark on their teaching career. This was a comparative study whereby data were collected from an Australian university and an American university to explore professional status as an international issue. This quantitative study utilised a Likert scale to gather responses from participants. Data were analysed and findings from both universities indicated that professional status was a significant concern for pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers felt that whilst they may have entered their teaching degree as a vocation, they hoped to receive status, as a professional, within society.

Keywords: Professional status, education, early childhood education.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Internationally, governments and regulatory bodies tasked with managing teacher registration are engaged in issues of raising teacher quality. As demands increase, so too does the accountability of teachers, resulting in the professional status of teachers being drawn into focus. Professional status is best described as a culmination of position, rank or social standing given to a profession by society (Hoyle, 2001). Research indicates that, as a profession, teaching is viewed as lower in status than other professions that have required a university level qualification (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011). When the teaching profession is separated into early childhood, primary/elementary and secondary, it is evident that early childhood teachers receive even less status (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006), despite international recognition of the importance of the early years in laying the foundations for life-long learning (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006; Tayler, 2012).

Limited research exists that specifically addresses the professional status of early childhood teachers (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006; Isenberg, 1995), however several studies have explored the teaching profession more broadly (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy, 2013; Hoyle, 2001; Verhoeven, Aelterman, Rots & Buvens, 2006). Professional status within the teaching profession has been explored by Hoyle (2001) as comprising of; prestige (its ranking in comparison to other occupations); status (the knowledge required by the profession in comparison to others); and esteem (the regard held for the profession by society). Within education, professional status is inexplicitly linked to issues of quality.

International standardised testing of students is frequently used as a tool for measuring the quality of teacher performance (Lavy, 2007). Countries around the world have implemented various strategies for increasing student achievement, such as increasing the entrance requirement for pre-service teachers seeking an undergraduate teaching degree, increasing financial remuneration, providing more appealing working conditions and increasing the authority that teachers in the profession have over their work environment (Lankford, Loeb, McEachin, Miller & Wyckoff, 2014). Extant literature asserts that as governments and regulatory bodies aim to raise quality, the demands of the profession are also raised; culminating in an increase in professional status given by society to the profession (Fisch, 2009; Klenowski, 2012). However, too heavy a focus on standards and accountability can have the opposite effect. As suggested by Fuller, Goodwyn and Francis-Brophy (2013), when autonomy and responsibility are removed (the exact features that constitute a profession) through the implementation of rigid standards to be adhered to, professional status is in fact diminished.

### **1.1 The Australian Context of Teaching**

The Australian educational landscape has undergone rapid change over the past decade. Most significant, have been the changes surrounding teacher registration and the introduction of standards, regulated by a governing body. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is a national organisation tasked with promoting excellence in teaching to maximise student achievement (AITSL, 2015). AITSL were established under the *Commonwealth Corporations Act 2001* and are funded by the Australian Government. AITSL developed a set of seven

standards that are used to monitor and assess both pre-service education degrees and the performance of practicing teachers.

AITSL, as the national governing body, function in partnership with state based regulatory bodies, known as the Teacher Registration Board (TRB). In Western Australia, the TRB was commissioned in 2012 as part of the *Teacher Registration Act 2012* (Act). The mandate of the TRB is to ensure that the standards outlined by AITSL are adhered to, at the organisational level (university) as well as individual (teacher) level. The introduction of standards by AITSL and the regulation of teacher performance based on these, by the TRB, have been initiatives focused on raising the quality of the teaching profession.

Through the implementation of national standards within the teaching profession, accountability has become an increasing concern. Teacher accountability is most often reported in relation to outcomes-based performance testing (Lewis & Young, 2013). Literature articulates that teachers are held accountable for student results, particularly in standardised tests, and their effectiveness or quality is judged by these. The use of league type tables to rate the effectiveness of schools, and their teachers, has become common practice (Klenowski, 2012). Whilst Australia has not embraced the controversial method of performance based pay, the responsibility of teachers to be accountable for student's performance in tests is prevalent.

In regards to pay, the income level for teachers in Australia consists of a series of steps that increase in line with years of experience. This form of pay scale recognises that teachers' practice improves as their years of experience increase. Under the *School Education Act Employees' (Teachers and Administrators) General Agreement 2011* a graduate teacher who is employed by the Department of Education commences on a salary of \$63,118, and progresses to \$69,254 after one year of experience and up to \$75,793 after two years of satisfactory teaching service (Department of Education Western Australia, 2014). Further remuneration is received as teachers take on leadership roles or additional responsibilities.

In the context of pre-service teacher training within Australia, degrees are offered that specifically target early childhood (to work with children from birth to age 8, or year 3), primary (year 1 to year 7) or secondary education (year 7 to year 12). Pre-service teachers choose one area of specialisation, or in some states and universities, are able to combine early childhood and primary courses. Across Australia, undergraduate degrees in education require 4 years of full-time study and include practicum components. Pre-service teachers, upon graduation, must meet the AITSL Graduate Standards and seek registration with the TRB to enable employment.

### **1.2 The American Context of Teaching**

Similarly, the American context is grappling with the use of standards and increased accountability measures within the teaching profession. America's culture of accountability not only targets student growth and achievement; there is great focus on measureable teacher and student growth goals (Greenberg & Walsh, 2012). Formal teacher evaluation systems are in place in 25 of 50 states of America, highlighting that professional accountability is a main player in student achievement (Cochran-Smith, Piazza & Power, 2013). The data driven culture that is pervasive in schools may be perceived as having a negative response from certain educators who claim the shift has led to a lack of meaning in assessments and instruction (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2012). Existing research asserts that high stakes assessments cause considerable stress to students and teachers, and this form of accountability takes away from teachers' autonomy consequently leading to more time spent on teaching to the test. Teachers now need to be "assessment-literate and data-wise" (Greenberg & Walsh, 2012, p. 7), which is a role-change for many teachers who are unfamiliar with analysing and utilising data.

America has fallen as a world leader in education, and the causes may include budget cuts, poverty, crowded classrooms, shorter school years, and high student diversity (Greenberg & Walsh, 2012). Not only are teachers disheartened by the pressures of accountability, they have also seen declining salaries since 1940 (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007). High poverty urban school districts have lower teacher salaries despite greater populations of students with high needs (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Average teacher salaries can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. 2011-2012 Average Yearly U.S. Teacher Base Salary from Districts with Salary Schedules (in US Dollars).

	Bachelor's degree and no teaching experience	Bachelor's degree and 10 years of teaching experience	Master's degree and no teaching experience	Master's degree and 10 years of teaching experience	Master's degree and 15 years of teaching experience	Highest possible step on the salary schedule
Average Salary	\$35,500	\$44,900	\$38,700	\$49,500	\$55,000	\$65,100

National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 2011-2012.

This salary disparity leads to less qualified teachers and higher teacher turnover. There is a student achievement gap that stems from unequal access to quality teachers, curriculum, systemic inequalities, and high poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Schools are still somewhat segregated in the U.S., and often high minority schools house predominantly low income students (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Teacher salaries vary greatly depending on the wealth of the neighbourhood in which the school exists.

Pre-service teacher education in America is typically separated into the areas of elementary, primary and secondary as regulatory bodies provide registration within these categories. Each State controls the licensing arrangements for teacher registration and therefore differences exist in the way the schooling years are differentiated. For instance, in the state of Oregon, at the time data were gathered for this investigation, there were four overlapping levels of teaching licensure authorisation. The *early childhood authorisation* level authorised individuals to teach from age three up to Grade 4. The *elementary* authorisation level authorised individuals to teach beginning in Grade 3 and through Grade 8 self-contained in an elementary school, and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade self-contained in a middle school. Thus, two different levels of authorisation could teach students in the third grade. A *middle school* authorisation level created another overlap in teaching authorisation. Those who possessed a middle school teaching license could teach from grades 5 through 10 and any multiple subject teaching assignment in grades 5 through 8 except in



specialty areas. The *high school* authorisation level authorised individuals to teach from grades 7 through 12, depending on which subject matter tests were passed.

## **2.0 THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This research project utilised a quantitative approach to investigate the perspectives of professional status held by pre-service teachers during the final year of their degree. The aim of this investigation was to gain an insight into the perspectives held by these pre-service teachers completing a range of education degrees (early childhood, elementary/primary and secondary) on the specific view of professional status of early childhood teaching. As a comparative study, the intent was to consider the differences or similarities that existed within professional status, between the American and Australian contexts of early childhood teaching.

### **2.1 Quantitative Methods**

A quantitative approach was employed for this investigation through the specific use of a Likert Scale. Quantitative approaches involve the collection of information represented as numerical data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and this method was well suited to the present investigation as a relatively large sample of pre-service teachers' perspectives could be gathered and analysed. The use of a Likert scale that contains pre-determined statements is a common quantitative tool as it allows for a "systematic method for data collection" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 24). The Likert scale utilised in this research contained twenty items and participants rated their response to the item on a scale of one to five (strongly disagree indicated by a '1' to strongly agree indicated as a '5'). The Likert scale was trialled to ensure it avoided ambiguous or vague language, as suggested by Neuman (2011).

### **2.2 Participants**

Participants for this research investigation were pre-service teachers, in the final year of their education degree. The pre-service teachers were selected from one university in Australia and one university in America, to allow for a comparative study. Participants were invited to participate during one of their units of study that involved a mix of early childhood, primary/elementary and secondary degree pre-service teachers. Participants were provided with consent forms and the opportunity to complete the Likert scale, of which 145 pre-service teachers, across the two universities, completed.

## **2.3 Data Analysis**

Data obtained through the Likert Scales were analysed to provide results in the form of statistics. These statistics were represented as frequency and percentage graphs to distinguish between Australian and American responses, as well as separated into the pre-service degree (early childhood, primary/elementary, secondary). The statistics were further analysed to provide the main findings from this project.

## **3.0 FINDINGS**

This paper presents one of the key findings from this quantitative investigation. Importantly, the way in which professional status is perceived by pre-service teachers about to embark on their teaching career was at the centre of this research. Initially, findings clearly illustrated that professional status was a significant concern and this notion was viewed as related to the importance placed on the profession by society. Following this, analysis identified that whilst the literature correlates professional status with financial remuneration, pre-service teachers distinguished the opportunity to feel valued as the centre point of professional status within teaching.

### **3.1 Professional Status: Interpretations and Perspectives**

Well over half of the pre-service teachers across Australia and America identified professional status as important to them. Australian participants placed a higher value on this, with 87% of participants agreeing with this item as compared to 65% of American participants. Furthermore, when presented with the statement, *“Professional status is something I think about”*, half of all pre-service teachers in the study agreed, indicating that not only was it important to them, but it was a construct they contemplated as ‘soon to be’ educators.

Professional status is frequently connected to occupational features such as financial remuneration, level of content knowledge required or qualification level. The extant literature describes these features using the terms prestige, status and esteem (Hoyle, 2001). Participants were presented with statements pertaining to these features to ascertain how they interpreted the term professional status, and therefore determine what was of most importance to them. Findings from Australian and American participants were alike, with financial remuneration considered of least importance with only 36% of Australians and 39% of Americans deeming pay to be a

consideration for professional status. Content knowledge followed closely and qualification level was the most correlated item from the three features, with 43% of Australian and 52% of American participants agreeing that the higher the level of qualification obtained, the greater the status of that profession.

Findings from this investigation also indicated that status differed within the teaching profession. As addressed in the literature, early childhood teacher status is often perceived as less when compared to colleagues in primary and secondary environments (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006). Participants in this study responded accordingly. Of the American pre-service teachers, 70% agreed that they desired for the professional status of early childhood teachers to change. The context in Australia was comparable, with 59% agreeing that early childhood status is perceived as less when compared to primary and secondary, and 63% recognising that this needs to change.

### **3.2 The Desire to Feel Valued**

The most significant finding from this investigation was that pre-service teachers associated professional status with the desire to feel valued. Whilst consideration was given to other attributes of the profession, such as rate of pay and level of qualification, the overwhelming aspiration was to gain the respect of the community as a professional. Fuller, Goodwyn and Francis-Brophy (2013) detailed in their findings of teacher professional status that respect was a key concern. Similarly, when participants in this investigation were provided with the item stating, "*I think professional status is about having the respect of the community*", 72% of Australian pre-service teachers and 84% of American pre-service teachers agreed.

The notion of receiving respect from the community, as a key feature of professional status, was further explored on the Likert scale with items relating to community impact. Participants were presented with statements regarding the way they perceived professional status to be connected with their desire to 'make a difference' and positively impact wider society. 60% of Australian participants and 59% of American participants agreed that a concern for them, as pre-service teachers, was to make an impact on society as a means of gaining professional status. The intrinsic

reward of feeling respected and valued was worth more to the pre-service teachers than any of the external compensations.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Pre-service teachers in both America and Australia considered professional status an important construct. As an issue that crosses continents, this investigation found that not only is professional status important, but it is interpreted by pre-service teachers as their ability to impact society and in turn, gain respect. Whilst it was recognised by the participants that professional status is also judged by income, degree of content knowledge required and qualification level, feeling valued and respected by society was considered the ultimate gain in professional status. As society places increasing demands on the teaching profession, the challenge ahead lies in ensuring that pre-service teachers gain the respect of their communities whilst adhering to externally imposed accountability measures, such as standards and student-based testing, that are used to make judgements on teacher quality.

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