

*Refereed Research Monograph*



**NSW BRANCH**

# **IDENTIFYING, VALIDATING AND CELEBRATING QUALITY TEACHING**

Reflections on a decade of research and experience within the  
*NSW Minister for Education and Training & Australian College of Educators’  
Quality Teaching Award.*

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## PREFACE

Just how should the work of our best teachers be identified, validated and recognised? The question remains a topical one in Australian education as well as elsewhere as we strive simultaneously for high quality teaching and improved student learning outcomes within career- defining professional standards frameworks for the teaching profession. Implicit in the question is an important issue: how indeed can the richness of what happens in the classroom and school community be captured in a way that is both meaningful and valid?

An opportunity to begin exploring these questions came in July 2000, not long before the beginning of the Olympic Games in Sydney, when the Australian College of Educators convened a major international conference with the theme *Priorities for the New Millennium*. Foremost among priorities, and in recognition of the direct links being reinforced at the time between quality teaching and student learning outcomes (see, for instance, Darling-Hammond, 2000), the then NSW Minister for Education and Training, the Hon. John Aquilina MP, presented the NSW Branch of the College with a challenge, and the necessary funding to respond to it. The challenge was, quite simply, to “identify our best teachers and tell us more about what they do”. The intention was to include teachers from all sectors, from early childhood through to university level, and from government and non-government employers. It was a challenge supported by all subsequent NSW Ministers for Education over the period in which the *NSW Minister for Education and Training & Australian College of Educators’ Quality Teaching Award* operated.

The challenge led to the formation of a working party to develop ways in which the Australian College of Educators might respond. Four things seemed self-evident and non-negotiable:

1. Quality teaching practice would need to be identified against agreed professional standards (at a time when such standards were only embryonic in varying forms in the Australian states and territories).
2. Quality teaching would need to be respected both as an art as well as a science if due recognition were to be given to those aspects of the role that were innovative and creative, as well as responsive to the increasing demands of data-driven and evidence-based leadership. It was also agreed that both employer and/or jurisdictional requirements would need to be respected as well as the diversity of contexts - early

childhood, primary schooling, secondary schooling, TAFE, and universities - in which teaching takes place.

3. Quality teaching would need to be acknowledged as something developed over time as an accumulation of knowledge, skills and values applied in different ways according to both the nature of the teaching and learning challenge and the contexts in which it is set. Ways would need to be developed, therefore, that gave insights into the longitudinal development of teachers and the ways they applied these qualities to address the learning needs of their students.
4. Quality teaching was something that had to be demonstrated primarily *in situ* and not experienced only second hand by way of written submissions, video recordings, other electronic media, or the like.

To these we added a more administratively-focused fifth point. Effectively operationalizing any scheme that identified and rewarded quality teaching would require the shared perspective and, indeed, the “ownership” by the teaching profession in NSW under the general auspices of the College. To this end, a Steering Committee was formed to include ACE representatives from the Government, Catholic and Independent school systems, the NSW Institute of Teachers, and the NSW Teachers Federation, as well as from the pre-school, primary school, secondary school, TAFE and university sectors.

The *NSW Minister for Education and Training & Australian College of Educators’ Quality Teaching Award (QTA)* that eventuated came to be acknowledged as possibly the most rigorous of the awards for teaching in Australia. The processes on which the award was based included:

- a standards-referenced framework for identifying and assessing quality teaching
- a nomination process
- referees’ reports based upon the standards
- a professional learning portfolio based upon the standards and developed within guidelines that scaffold the preparation of each portfolio and allow comparability for assessment purposes, but which in no way determined the actual contents of the portfolio

- a peer assessment and short-listing process undertaken by acknowledged exemplary and experienced teachers in each of the five sectors- pre-school to tertiary- who, increasingly, were recipients of the QTA and had undertaken some joint training in portfolio assessment
- two-person site visits to short-listed applicants to actually see each one teach as well as to talk with students, colleagues, supervisors and (in the school and pre-school sectors) parents, using protocols developed around the professional standards
- recommendations to the NSW Minister for Education and Training by the Australian College of Educators of those considered to be worthy recipients (not “winners”) of the award
- celebration through presentation of the award by the NSW Minister and the Australian College of Educators at a ceremony held predominantly at Government House, Sydney, and
- recognition by way of the newsprint media, and by school and employer-sponsored events and communication .

The peer-assessed nature of the assessment processes, referees’ reports, applications and portfolios written against professional standards, and the site visits, provided a means of triangulating multiple sources of data and thereby contributed to the overall validity and reliability of the award. When it concluded in 2012, the *NSW Quality Teaching Award* remained the only award for quality teaching in Australia that involved direct observations of the nominee teaching, and at work, in his or her school or workplace.

The standards that underpinned the award process were based on the recommendations of a national discussion paper, *Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms* (Brock, 2000), written under the auspices of the Australian College of Educators in association with the Australian Association for Research in Education and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association. They were interdependent, generic ‘standards’, useful in an award process such as the QTA and not to be confused with the standards-based regulatory frameworks that State and Territory authorities now determine for teacher registration and career path progression under the general auspices of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). The scope of the standards framework used in the *NSW Quality Teaching Award*, it must be remembered, needed to be broad enough to encompass applicants from all stages of education, pre-school to tertiary.

By the end of 2011, some 473 teachers had received the NSW *Quality Teaching Award* consisting of 9 early childhood teachers, 130 primary teachers, 157 secondary, 112 TAFE, and 65 university teachers.

In taking up Minister Aquilina's other challenge, "to tell us more about what our best teachers do", the College through its QTA Steering Committee instigated a modest but continuous research program within the resources that were available. The research program was grounded in teachers' stories of their working lives and of the impact of the QTA upon them. That body of work, as well as other research relating to our focus, provided the basis for this monograph. With over a decade of QTA data available from the research, we considered that it was timely to critically reflect on what that data reveals, as well as to discern the implications it holds for future endeavours in identifying, validating, celebrating and recognising the work of accomplished teachers. Telling the story of the NSW QTA has drawn, therefore, on these research projects undertaken throughout the program. The research projects are listed to provide the reader with further information on both methodology and findings.

While much has been learnt from the QTA across the education sectors from pre-school to tertiary, this monograph has the school sector as its main focus. Here it should be recorded that what we found, and did not necessarily expect to find, were the similarities that emerged across the sectors. It is for this reason that we have included some quotes from QTA recipients in the TAFE and university sectors where it has been relevant to do so.

In the period since the inception of the award times have moved on. There are now more awards for good teaching and school leadership, for example, across all sectors and within sectors. Professional standards frameworks have evolved in the school sector from work in the Australian States and Territories to form a set of national standards for school teaching under the auspices of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2012).

Despite these positive developments, there remain fundamental questions of how to best identify, validate, celebrate and recognise the work of accomplished teachers. How do we encourage our 'best' teachers to come forward voluntarily for recognition at higher order levels of professional accomplishment? What enabling conditions would support them in doing so?

We note with interest the emergence of increased interest in these questions both nationally (AITSL, 2012a) and internationally (see, for example, Strong, 2011).

We recognise that much of the work in this area continues to be developmental in pursuit of the ongoing improvement of the teaching profession. In providing an opportunity to reflect on practice, this monograph offers a number of insights that appear to us to be useful in informing current discussion on quality teaching and its relationship to student learning. It is to this end that we hope that the monograph makes a useful contribution.

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## **1. CHALLENGES IN IDENTIFYING AND VALIDATING ACCOMPLISHED TEACHING.**

We need to begin by making an important distinction: it is that of recognizing exceptional teaching for the purposes of awards compared to that of recognizing accomplished teaching for the purposes of career advancement as defined by professional standards frameworks within educational jurisdictions. The latter, with its links to career path progression and sometimes remuneration, highlights a number of important considerations with regard to the validity and reliability of instruments used to measure accomplishment and to arrive at a consistency of judgment in adjudicating the outcomes. That is not to say that such considerations are not inherent in award and recognition processes for quality teaching, but rather that, within standards-referenced, jurisdictional schemes tied to career path progression, these considerations become more pronounced, perhaps even restrictive in some ways, as to what might be achieved. The QTA was not recognized by employers financially, nor did it mesh with existing career and salary structures.

Sykes (in Lustick, 2011) argues that there are three dominant issues that underpin teaching today. First, there is the issue of the complexity of teaching and the question of whether or not analysis of it can be reduced to routinized procedures. Are there dimensions of good teaching that are not easily captured either in standard evaluation protocols or, indeed, in attention being given only to value-added achievement by students as recorded in test scores?

Sykes argues that the theme of (teacher) professionalism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s has been eclipsed by a new set of reforms that pay scant attention to teaching itself, preferring to concentrate just on outcomes as measured by tests. What is needed is a better balance between efforts to cultivate the teaching profession as well as hold it to account. The exploration of teaching therefore requires research that allows the reader to “get in behind the scenes” in a way that research studies seldom do. It is a challenge also commented upon in the Australian context by Dinham (2013) who has observed that, instead of a collegial opening up of classrooms and professional practice, there is a commonly-held view that a greater control over, and surveillance of, teachers’ work is needed. Building our understandings of quality teaching, therefore, is paramount.

## **2. TEACHERS' CAREER TRAJECTORIES**

The nature of teachers' career path trajectories has received only limited attention in the international literature over the last two decades (Bayer, Brinkler, Plauborg, & Rolls, 2009). This could be held to be somewhat ironic given the emphasis now placed by many education jurisdictions on career-path defining statements of professional teaching standards that suggest somewhat of a linear progression.

We know from the professional development literature that the nature of teacher growth can best be seen as recursive rather than linear; as cycles of aspiration, preparation, orientation, induction, development, reflection and review as teachers move from neophyte, to competence, to accomplishment, to formal leadership positions and beyond. Impacting on these cycles are the influences of the context in which teachers work, and the fellow educators with whom they come into contact, as well as the nature of their personal lives and the events that impact on them. Understandably there are periods of consolidation, even stagnation, and times of growth. There can be little doubt however that some classroom teachers, through experience, professional learning and reflection on practice, do gain higher levels of professional accomplishment with some doing this to an even greater extent than others. (See for instance, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald & Zeichner, 2005). Gaining a better understanding of the complexities associated with this progress has been one of the goals of the QTA specifically as it relates to the identification and recognition of more accomplished teaching practice.

The transition from neophyte, through competence, to more accomplished levels of teaching is now well recognised by statements of professional standards in Australia and elsewhere (see, for example, AITSL, 2012b) with a consensus emerging that this latter group of teachers should be identified through voluntary processes and appropriately rewarded. It is also acknowledged that teaching industrial awards in Australia have not fully addressed this progression, opting instead for annual incremental steps to the top of a common teacher salary scale that recognizes time served rather than developing expertise (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008; Dinham, 2011).

One key assumption is that the number of prospective teachers designated as "accomplished" against these professional standards in the Australian context is relatively significant. In Dinham's (2011) estimation, it could be in the order of 75,000-90,000 at the 'Highly

Accomplished' level, and 25-30,000 at the 'Lead' teacher level- 30 per cent and 10 per cent of practising teachers in Australia respectively- using the AITSL designations. To reach such a state might take 10 years of more, assuming rigorous, valid and reliable processes for teacher assessment for certification against the standards (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008).

While it is one thing to have professional standards frameworks in place, or even for that matter some form of financial or in-kind inducement, putting these into operation at the higher levels of professional attainment where engagement by teachers is voluntary raises complex questions. How might we best identify our more accomplished teachers, encourage them to participate, and validate what they do in ways that are transparent, valid, reliable and equitable? Use of only data based on the performance of students in tests and the suggested use of other approaches such as performance pay schemes have been rightly critiqued as, at best, simplistic, and, at worst, detrimental, to the overall quality of teaching and learning in schools (Brock, 2011).

The New South Wales experience with the *Quality Teaching Award* shows what could be achieved working on a limited budget and through voluntary processes, both in administering the award and, from teachers' perspectives, by participating in it. The insights generated through the QTA research program offer some guidance for future directions. These are presented not so much as supporting a particular model to be adopted uncritically elsewhere, but rather as points that need to be at least considered in any new program design. To this end we are mindful of the challenge put forward by Ingvarson & Rowe (2007) that, while the capacity to develop standards and credible methods for assessing teacher performance is growing, more investment is needed to translate this capacity into viable systems for advanced certification. Above all, they have argued, is the fact that more research focused on developing better methods for assessing the quality of teaching is needed.

## 2. IDENTIFYING ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS

Given the proportion of teachers that we believe demonstrate more accomplished practice, a key question is one of why is it that comparatively small numbers nominate for such things as teaching awards or recognition at higher levels within existing standards frameworks in the Australian states and territories. An understandable and initial response might be that “it is early days yet”, or that “the tangible rewards for doing so are insufficient”, or even “that there has not been the general opportunity to do so”. The question assumed an even greater prominence in 2012 with an announcement by the (then) Federal Minister for Education of a scheme to recognise and reward some Highly Accomplished Teachers and Lead Teachers within the AITSL Professional Standards Framework (AITSL, 2012; Garrett, 2012).

Our research (McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007; McCulla, 2010a; 2011) suggests that the reasons why teachers appear reluctant to come forward are far more complex than those proffered above and relate to both the self perceptions of accomplished teachers and the organizational cultures of the schools and school systems within which they work.

### i. Nomination

If there is one simple yet profound fact that stands out from our research it is this: the majority of recipients of the QTA in New South Wales were encouraged by someone else to nominate for the award rather than self-nominate themselves. In fact, many accomplished teachers, given the traditional isolationist nature of the profession, had not come to fully realize how much their teaching was appreciated and seen to be significant by others.

Those doing the encouraging were supportive colleagues, supervisors, principals and heads of departments and, in some instances, students. Nomination, therefore, was experienced by many of the recipients as a “nudge”, or as a “tap on the shoulder”. It was an affirmation of their professional work yet one to which they would have to agree to by signing the nomination form if their nomination were to proceed for the award.

*I didn't nominate! I was nominated by staff and students. It took me by surprise! I didn't think anyone was looking that closely about what I was doing. I was too busy. Someone said “a few of us think you are doing a really good job” (Secondary teacher, non-government school)*

*It was the school welfare team that nominated me- the principal and some people from the staff. They nudged me forward. I didn't realize what it would cost in personal time. I saw it as a good thing for the school. I'm pleased I did it though. (Secondary teacher, government school)*

*I was nominated by the principal on the recommendation of a Year 12 student who approached the principal. It was a great feeling to be asked. The people who get these [QTAs] are often the busiest people in the school. (Secondary teacher, government school)*

It is also interesting to note that this “nudge factor” was also observable among TAFE and university nominees for the award.

*My Head Teacher nominated me. I hadn't heard of them [the QTAs] before. I was flattered. It was lovely. (TAFE teacher, rural)*

*Someone from our staff development people encouraged me. I can't remember who. They didn't let on how much work the portfolio would be. Once committed, however, I'm driven and I followed it through. (University teacher, metropolitan)*

A parallel finding is that in the vast majority of these instances, it is far less likely that these teachers would have nominated themselves. Most were simply content in getting on with what they enjoyed doing. This is an extremely important finding on a number of counts.

First, there was evidence in the interviews that simply being approached by someone else with the suggestion of nominating was, in itself, greatly affirming.

Secondly, from the nominator's perspective, the willingness to suggest nomination is generally, but not always, indicative of a strong workplace culture focused on teaching and learning and the pursuit of excellence.

*The College Director suggested I nominate. I'd won a few local awards. I got an invitation to attend a briefing meeting. I thought it didn't sound too bad. I got a bit of a razzing from a few of my colleagues... [laughs]... so I did it anyway. It wasn't a problem. [College Director's] talk was vital though. Without it, I wouldn't have gone through the process. (TAFE teacher, metropolitan)*

Third, a key motivation in proceeding with the nomination was often the feeling that it would help to promote what was perceived to be the good work of the school, faculty or department, or to promote that specific area of education.

*I decided to go ahead to promote what we do here. It's an incredible team. My nomination I thought would represent them. (TAFE teacher, rural).*

## ii. **Awards and education cultures**

Australia has had a chequered history with regard to supporting awards for teaching excellence (McCulla, 2009). Put it down to a “tall poppy” syndrome where it is sometimes seen to be “un-Australian” to stand out from the crowd, the “collegiality” that some argue characterises teaching, industrial pressures that seek conformity, time pressures, or whatever, the fact remains that awards for and recognition of teaching excellence have remained relatively under-stated on the education landscape.

It is interesting to compare this scenario with many other fields of endeavour where it seems awards have proliferated. Boston (2002) has noted that professions such as law, medicine and architecture have tangible and widely understood types of accomplishment: cases won, cures effected, buildings well-designed. So too does creative and innovative achievement in all sectors of the Arts. Even the most tightly knit sporting teams will recognise the player of the match or of the series. The accomplishments of teachers in contrast are less tangible, arguably more complex, and therefore less well understood and promoted in the public domain.

That said, there appears to have been a gradual increase in the prominence and number of awards for teaching excellence in all sectors of Australian education. The need to recognise the accomplishments of teachers has been discussed in the literature for over two decades. (See, for instance, Beare, 2002; Boston, 2002; Cummings, 2003; Dinham & Scott 2003). Cummings (2003, p.7) describes “a rapid expansion in the growth of award schemes and other forms of professional recognition” as a result of a “seismic shift in attitude” with regard to “acknowledging and rewarding teachers’ work”. These trends are consistent with long-standing calls within the profession for quality teaching and accomplished teachers to be made more prominent publicly (Beare, 2002). In our view, these developments signify a recognition of deeper-order learning within the teaching profession and a greater willingness of the profession to mainstream awards and recognition programs in professional and community life.

Education quite rightly has prided itself on collegial workplace cultures, more so in today’s fast-paced and ever-changing world given that it is difficult to survive in isolation either as a principal or as a teacher. Teamwork is essential. It is at this point opinions diverge. Some school leaders have argued that it is inappropriate to single out one or two teachers for

recognition over others. They argue that they are wary of “the tall poppy” syndrome disrupting what they see as otherwise harmonious workplace environments.

It has also been observed by some that education has become part of a choice and market-driven world where schools compete for market share and teachers are under increased personal surveillance through examination and high-stake test results, and therefore increased pressure with regard to their individual performance as defined by results in these assessment programs. Pressures such as these can serve to further isolate teachers and feed the “tall poppy” syndrome (McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007)

The available research suggests that the value placed on teaching awards in school systems remains ambivalent with regard to how awards relate to promotion and career path progression. We note that there has been no clear relationship established between the two. While acknowledging that many QTA recipients do not appear to have applied for awards with promotion in mind (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007), it could also be observed that teaching awards have not been recognized sufficiently in any institutional processes for performance development and review, in job selection, and for career path progression. It is a phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed in the United Kingdom (Frame, Johnson and Rosie, 2006) and North America (Carusetta, 2001). If this is the situation for teaching awards, it also begs the question of how things might be different with accreditation at higher levels of professional accomplishment within standards frameworks.

As recorded above, it was clear from the majority of responses in our studies that the capacity to nominate for the QTA award was generally an indicator of a truly collegial school or workplace culture focused on high standards of teaching and learning. This, however, was not always the case with some award recipients facing situations where there were at least undertones of discontent.

Respondents in our research were asked how being a recipient of a *NSW Quality Teaching Award* impacted on their colleagues. Here, three distinctive scenarios can be identified, each of which underscores the importance of school context.

In the first scenario, there is a strong teaching and learning culture in the school or workplace and the team effort of putting forward a colleague for an award is part and parcel of that. In

return, recipients view the award as a “team award” and are of the view that they could not have achieved the award by themselves.

*I was sort of talked into it by the staff. It really is a joint effort. You can teach well in isolation, but it is much better to work as part of a collegial team. You can bounce things off each other. Offer constructive criticism. That's a very important part of what we do here. It's a team effort. (TAFE teacher, metropolitan).*

The majority of the nominations received for the QTA fell within this category, an observation that was certainly confirmed on site visits to the schools of short-listed applicants.

Once good teachers and their nominators are involved in the award, there is evidence in our research that their influence spreads to a point where, in strong workplace cultures, others are encouraged and supported to apply for the *Quality Teaching* or other awards. There was evidence of some QTA recipients helping to mentor other teachers in their applications. (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007; McCulla, Scott and Dinham, 2009; McCulla, 2010)

In the second scenario, there are examples or undertones of the “tall poppy” syndrome present but not sufficiently so to block the nomination.

*Some people asked “why did she get it?” But it's not about self-promotion. People hate people who get prizes. They are jealous. But I know most of my colleagues are good teachers. I went for the award. That was the difference. I now nominate for awards, both internally and for outside recognition. (University teacher, metropolitan)*

In a third scenario, school executive may even be seen to block an application. There is an interesting case in our study of a secondary teacher who was nominated by students for the award which was then supported (reluctantly) by the school executive. The study suggested this reluctance was probably motivated so as not to disturb the “collegial culture” in the school by signalling anyone out for recognition or by promoting approaches to teaching that could be seen to be at odds with the prevailing norm within the school. The QTA team on the site visit picked up on this tension but was swayed by the high degree of support shown by students for the nominee. It raises the question as to whether a supportive school or workplace culture is a prerequisite for nominating for awards. The answer has to be “not necessarily”, at least as observed by this recipient, but it certainly helps. It also highlights the importance of some form of external process/validation as part of teacher assessment.

*At the time I was having incredible conflict with the executive in the school about my teaching style. It was making me question as to whether I was cut out for the job. The executive was not overly supportive*

*(of the application). I decided that I would let nothing stand in the way. I'm still in contact with one of the (QTA) assessors. He told me that a heap of kids came up to him to speak about me (during the site visit). One made some earth shattering statements about how I had supported her. It (the QTA) proved a point to me that I was doing the right thing. Nothing was rehearsed. I'm a Sidney Poitier fan (ie the film, "To Sir With Love"); that is still what we are on about. The QTA process confirmed to me that it (the QTA) was deserved; it had to be earned...I have five ex-students who are now (same KLA specialization) teachers. That tickles me pink! (Secondary teacher, rural)*

The research also suggests that the proportion of teachers nominating for a *Quality Teaching Award* in each education sector might be held to be an indicator of the value place culturally in that sector with regard to celebrating quality teaching. Numbers, it was noticed, varied from time to time influenced by factors including the availability of other internal awards within the employing authority, the degrees of emphasis placed on awards generally, and by the number of advocates who were proactive in their support of the QTA.

Collectively, these observations lead us to the view that a substantial cultural shift is still required in the teaching profession and in the Australian community generally if we are to fully recognize, applaud and reward teaching excellence adjudicated against professional standards. That said, we are also heartened by the developments outlined above that are establishing strong foundations for this to occur.

### iii. **Awards and educational leadership**

The willingness of school leaders to encourage and support suitable candidates in coming forward for recognition at higher levels of professional accomplishment, as we have noted, is paramount. Our research (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007) showed that school leaders, regardless of whether they are school-based, systemic or jurisdictional, have highly important roles to play in establishing cultures where the identification and acknowledgement of excellence in teaching in its many forms is the norm. The same applies in the other education sectors (McCulla, Scott and Dinham, 2009).

Beyond altruism there are also legal reasons for doing so. Regulatory frameworks that encourage good teachers to present for recognition at higher levels of professional accomplishment will, unlike awards, require processes that ensure all teachers have equal opportunity to apply and that they are in no way inhibited or discouraged in their application by unsupportive workplace cultures over which they have little or no control. As for the future of voluntary awards themselves, they have the potential to continue to play a valuable role in helping teachers demonstrate in creative ways the attributes and capabilities to be demonstrated

in frameworks of professional standards and, in so doing, serve as evidence for indicators within those frameworks. This relationship in itself is worthy of further exploration.

If there is one key message we would take from our research in this area of identifying accomplished teachers it is this: when they are encouraged and supported by those with whom they work closely to do so, good teachers will be more inclined to “step out from the crowd” and seek recognition for professional accomplishment.

### **3. VALIDATING THE WORK OF ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS**

#### **i. Assessing what it is that it is important to assess**

To set out to assess what it is that it is important to assess, in contrast to what can be easily tested, one has to accept the proposition that accomplished teaching, like many other fields of human endeavour, is at its heart based on moral purpose, knowledge, understanding, skills and values – and characterised by imagination, creativity and the demonstrated capacity to engage students with learning.

Teaching has been described by the OECD as the “knowing and caring profession” (OECD 1994: 36). Accomplished teachers have also been described as “knowers, carers, actors, head coaches, humdrummers, stirrers, listeners, susser-outers, intuiters, empathisers, creators, pacifiers, and masters of repetition - above all, (they are) people who keep hanging in there in the knowing and caring profession” (Brock, 2001). Like good sportsmen and sportswomen, good teachers know how to “read the game” a number of moves ahead, and position themselves to be in the right place at the right time as if they had all the time in the world for their actions. Like the creative artist, what they produce is much greater than the sum of individual parts. Like the medical professional, they work sometimes alone and sometimes in teams identifying, applying and reflecting on possible solutions to identified (educational) problems. Acknowledging this complexity in teachers’ work is, of course, disconcerting to those who would seek or advocate simple measures of teacher effectiveness.

After two years of the QTAs, the steering committee members who had been instrumental in assessing portfolios, short-listing preferred candidates and undertaking school visits, generated a shared list of attributes they had observed in the classrooms of teachers and in the evidence the teachers had presented for the short-listing process. The attributes were:

1. a high level of knowledge, imagination, passion, and belief in their field
2. an overriding commitment to, and high aspirations for, moving ahead the learning of their individual students
3. a rich repertoire of skills, methods and approaches, built up over years of experience, on which they are able to draw to provide the right ‘mix’ for the specific needs of individual students

4. a detailed understanding of the context in which they are working, of the specific expectations of the local community, and of the needs of the cohort of students for whom they are responsible
5. a capacity to respond to the student cohort, individually and collectively, and to the context through their teaching practice
6. a refusal to let anything get in the way of their own or their students' learning, and what they perceive as needing to be addressed
7. a high level of respect and even affection from their school communities, a by-product of their work and professionalism
8. a great capacity for engagement in professional learning activities
9. a great capacity to contribute to the professional learning of others and a willingness to do so, and
10. moral leadership and professionalism, in that they exemplify high values and qualities and seek to encourage these in others.

Dinham and Scott (2002)

Many spoke of the “passion” for teaching and learning that these teachers exhibited and it was agreed that, while hard to describe, it was clearly observable in all its manifestations when seen from the perspective of a colleague, supervisor, parent or student.

The list of attributes has stood the test of time remarkably well through the life of the NSW QTA. A number of these attributes find expression, of course, in professional standards frameworks. The less tangible, however, often do not. An important question therefore arises as to how they might be made more observable in any assessment and validation process if accomplished teaching is not to be reduced to an atomistic, tick-the-box, standardised checklist that values conformity at the expense of qualities such as creativity, imagination and innovation.

It was for these reasons that the QTA processes opted for professional learning portfolios reflecting the standards framework that was in use as the principal means of initial assessment and short listing of applicants.

## **ii. Professional learning portfolios**

With the use of professional learning portfolios becoming more widespread in professional practice in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, it seemed important that the QTA establish a framework within which portfolios might be prepared and against which they might be assessed. It was equally important that any framework developed did not inhibit creativity in the expression of professional practice, and that it was equally at home in its application in the various stages of education encompassed by the award - preschool to tertiary. It followed that guidelines should scaffold rather than dictate how a portfolio might be constructed.

The guidelines suggested that the portfolio's contents include a cover page, table of contents, a one-page career map, a statement of professional beliefs and values, and evidence of professional accomplishment as it related to the four broad domains that were outlined in the standards framework - curriculum content; pedagogy; assessment and reporting of student outcomes; and professional values, learning and development.

An important principle adopted was that applicants should not feel that they had to put together a portfolio 'starting from scratch', as it were. We recognised that while some applicants may have been 'building' a portfolio as part of their own professional development, other applicants would not have been doing so. An important assumption that was made was that accomplished teachers, as a demonstration of accomplishment, would be able to identify a significant array of artefacts arising from and contributing to their practice. Put another way, they would have had enough 'artefacts' – (that is, a collation of materials, experiences and personal professional stories) – to enable them to construct a portfolio in response to the guidelines. The QTA Steering Committee did not want applicants to artificially 'create' an impressive portfolio that had nothing or very little to do with their lived experiences as a teacher. The question, therefore, was not what had to be created for the portfolio but rather what might be selected and justified against the standards framework for inclusion.

The assumption of the Steering Committee was verified by practice. For many QTA recipients, it became not so much a problem as to what might be included in the portfolio, but rather what would be left out.

Reflecting on the use of professional learning portfolios by primary and secondary teachers, McCulla, Hayne and Stone (2002) referred to them as “windows on professional practice of accomplished teachers at work”. Their review of the use of portfolios revealed the following.

Applicants who demonstrated accomplishment were able to clearly delineate what had been chosen for inclusion in their portfolio and why. This guided navigation through the portfolio. Successful applicants were able to show development over time in their career maps with evidence of reflection and growth clearly demonstrated through career stages. A number of applicants presented their career map visually.

Successful applicants were able to clearly articulate their professional beliefs and values and give concrete examples. They were often able to draw on educational literature, theory and research to underpin and justify their beliefs, thus demonstrating an integration of practice with theory that found expression in such teachers’ pedagogies.

Successful applicants demonstrated a breadth of knowledge within their curriculum content areas. Many articulated and justified, through reference to the education literature, the pedagogical understandings that shaped their practice. They drew from an extensive array of artefacts that included class and individual programs, student work samples, class photographs, videos, PowerPoint presentations, parental and sometimes student commendations, referees’ reports and references from peers.

Successful applicants were able to articulate the inputs to assessment processes in terms of approaches that were used and the professional framework in which assessment and reporting took place. Their portfolios gave insights into the challenges and successes of the applicant’s teaching to meet the specific needs, interests and capacities of students and the teaching context, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data and other evidence that had been gathered. Successful applicants were able to discuss the means and effectiveness of reporting to parents, again demonstrating through artefacts the approaches that were in place and the parental response.

Successful applicants demonstrated professional growth over time through formal courses of study, short courses undertaken to meet clearly identified needs, and personal reading. They demonstrated the impact their professional learning had on the learning of others in the

workplace, through leadership of specific areas, mentoring or coaching, or beyond the school in local, statewide or, in some instances, national and international forums.

Whether a person stayed in the one school for some considerable time, or moved around a number of schools, did not seem a factor in demonstrating accomplishment. Accomplishment came from the capacity for personal renewal and growth, and for moving out of the “comfort zones” of one's existing learning and networks to influence and to be influenced by the learning of others.

The widespread use of professional learning portfolios is sometimes dismissed in education circles as being “too time consuming” and therefore a workload or, potentially, an industrial issue. The differentiating aspect of the use of professional learning portfolios in awards such as the QTA and in demonstrating higher-order professional standards is indeed in the voluntary nature of nominating for the award.

It is acknowledged that the preparation of a professional learning portfolio is time consuming, but if we listen to the voices of teachers who have prepared portfolios to demonstrate more accomplished practice it is viewed, almost unequivocally, as time well spent (McCulla, Hayne & Stone, 2002; Dinham & Scott, 2003a; McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007). The following quotes are illustrative.

*It didn't seem like I was preparing for an award. It was like...like putting a photo album together...I remember that...what you were doing and why, and where it was taking the students.. It made me examine what I was doing and why. (Primary teacher, rural)*

*I found doing the portfolio really good. It gave me time to reflect which I didn't have in my day-to-day life. I was really pleased to have done this...I have never had to do anything like that...to compile things that I had created...things that worked. Not long ago, I did it again to update [what was there]. We all should do a portfolio at some time or another. I will use it for [NSW Institute of Teachers] accreditation. It's all there now. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)*

*The portfolio works at great strength to those who embrace it. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)*

Of significance was the comment made by a number of respondents in the QTA research that, even if they had not been successful, the reflective process of putting their portfolio together was valuable in its own right. It would be interesting to see if this observation is borne out by a sample of unsuccessful applicants. In this light, one respondent had applied previously for a QTA and been unsuccessful. This is what she had to say:

*I had nominated previously...actually it was a parent who nominated me. The feedback I received [from the QTA primary sub-group] was that I didn't put enough into my portfolio although everyone was pleased with what I was doing. [Name- previous QTA recipient] showed me his portfolio. It was a great help. It showed me the amount of what was needed to go in. Teachers are reluctant to write at length about what they are doing. It gave me ideas.*

*It [preparing the portfolio] made me aware of what we do and how we do it...it's hard to explain...it re-focused how we do it...you know...sometimes we go about the daily job in a way that doesn't allow you time to think about what you are doing...the whole philosophy of your teaching, or (the employer), and whether they merge. (Primary teacher, metropolitan)*

It is our view that the power of the professional learning portfolio cannot be underestimated both in its capacity to give a window into teaching practice and as a reflective tool for professional learning. Almost universal support for professional learning portfolios among the QTA recipients interviewed is powerful testimony indeed.

The logical question arises as to whether the process could be shortened by way of professional development courses or exemplars. Those involved in the QTA process have generally been sensitive to any approach that results in a sameness or conformity in response. It is one thing to provide a scaffold for the development of a professional learning portfolio; it is quite another to suggest adherence to a more rigid format. While guidance is useful, ownership of the design and construction of any portfolio must reside with the individual teacher.

Portfolios as conceived in the *NSW Quality Teaching Awards* could not be manufactured according to a defined formula. They are individualized expressions of teachers at work and, as such, of the art and craft of accomplished teaching. They require a teacher to think and reflect deeply and to “be them self”. It is for these reasons that the QTA Steering Committee was also reluctant to hold up models of successful portfolios, preferring local sessions instead where QTA recipients talked about how they prepared their portfolio and illustrated what they were saying by examples drawn from their work. Many recipients preferred to not display their portfolios because they would simply be seen as a model to be copied. It is a reminder perhaps that the creativity which is the essence of, and which underpins, all accomplished performance can be emulated but never simply copied.

### **iii. School visits**

“Wouldn't a site visit to see a teacher at work be off-putting to the teacher and intrusive to that school community?” are often-asked questions.

The QTA's validation process involving school visits was a new concept in teaching awards of this kind. As we have recorded above, the opportunity to observe teachers at work seemed to the QTA steering committee to be axiomatic in any valid process of identification of accomplished teaching practice. As work on assessing portfolios took place, it also became apparent that school visits could not be separated from an intimate knowledge of the portfolio and its relationship to the standards of professional practice that it sought to demonstrate. Nor could it be separated from insights provided by referees' reports. It was logical, therefore, for those who had been involved in the portfolio assessment process to follow it up with school visits.

In the spirit of the awards, the nature of the visits posed a number of challenges. First, every effort needed to be made to ensure, as far as possible, that the tone of the visit not be perceived as hierarchical or "inspectorial", while recognising nonetheless that some final judgment had to be made at the end as to whether the applicant would be recommended for the award. This put considerable weight upon the earlier portfolio assessment process and the short-listing of applicants. It also suggested a within-school/workplace approach that centred more on collegial, professional conversations about teaching practice than a checklist or set of questions to be rigidly adhered to. It also implied that those undertaking the visit should be, and be seen to be, accomplished practitioners and able to engage the applicant and his/her colleagues, students and their parents in appropriate dialogue.

Secondly, those undertaking the school visits were guests in the school community. It was important to be seen to be representing the Australian College of Educators and not to be seen as belonging to a specific employing authority. To give a structure to each day, and a degree of ownership by the nominee over it, the College provided guidelines for the ways in which a program might flow. These required observations of at least two teaching sessions, and opportunities to talk to students, colleagues, supervisors and parents or community members closely associated with the work of the teacher. Generally speaking, it was left to the applicant to arrange any such opportunities. As far as schools were concerned, those undertaking the visits had a discussion with the Principal as a matter of course.

Rather than being simply a final check as originally conceived, it very soon became apparent that the school/workplace visits were a key stage of the assessment process. The visitation

schedules tended to flow smoothly partly because of the ways in which each nominee was able to interpret the suggested itinerary in his or her workplace, but especially because of the willingness of the teachers concerned to talk about their practice to an informed audience. Indeed, many expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to do so. The importance of this aspect of professional work, the power inherent in collegial conversations, and the provision of opportunities to do so, is sometimes under-estimated (McCulla, Hayne and Stone, 2002).

### **Reporting on site visits**

The most potent form of assessing and reporting arose out of the conversation between assessors at the immediate end of the school visit when the professional practice of the nominee was discussed and recorded holistically. This served two purposes. First, it helped to avoid any temptation to reduce the standards framework to a checklist. Secondly, it provided further opportunities to explore the creativity and individuality that were being demonstrated by the applicant in the classroom. By writing a more holistic report, not lengthy in nature, it was as if the assessors themselves were preparing their own referee's report, first individually, then together. What was different was that this occurred at the end of a process that had been built up over time through consideration of the initial referees' reports, engagement with the professional learning portfolio and, finally, a day of observations, impressions and discussions. Collectively these brought together a range of perceptions on that teacher's work. Each of the vignettes created seemed to capture the spirit of the teacher and the art of his or her professional practice. It was a key stepping stone in making the final judgements and recommendations to the QTA steering committee which was the final arbiter in providing advice to the Minister on recipients of the Award. Collectively, these vignettes spoke highly of the attributes of accomplished practice as well as, individually, the means by which it was being achieved in the differing local contexts in which teachers worked.

The approach that was adopted can be seen, therefore, as one that brought professional standards, professional learning portfolios, and professional conversations into full alignment. While it was a common and understandable occurrence for respondents at first to feel "daunted" by the prospect of someone coming to their school or workplace, the feeling generally soon dissipated on two counts: the "business as usual" routines as the day's teaching started; and the collegiality of the QTA team who made it evident that they were there to both share in and talk about accomplished teaching practice.

*In hindsight, the QTA [process] gave a sense of closure. It is a self-reflective process; a validation of your own practice. You get caught up in day-to-day routines but don't necessarily think about things...there is no time for reflection. The closest you get to it is evaluations. The award has you showcasing positive aspects [of your teaching] and that is quite affirming. You make a genealogy of successes. We don't do enough of it...blowing our own trumpets...showcasing our successes. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)*

*It was great to share [accomplished teaching practice]. It would be a great pity if the award was ever changed to make it non-relational; to change that face-to-face feedback from assessors. The process was incredibly good. I enjoyed having the assessors there. The lecture [I gave] was the worst of my career! But the people who came out were teachers. They knew how teaching worked...that not everything is or needs to be perfect. (University teacher, metropolitan)*

The research uncovered an interesting phenomenon that occurred during site visits in primary schools that was not replicated in the later years of secondary schooling. A simple question to a group of parents such as “What is/was it like to have your son/daughter in (teacher’s name) class?” was often sufficient to provoke a very emotional response. It was a common response in these years.

*The biggest positive was the site visit. I had so many parents and ex-students who attended and they all burst into tears! They all came into the room at once and they all burst into tears! The impact [of my teaching] on the students was still remembered. (Primary teacher, metropolitan)*

Why is this so? Perhaps the fundamental reason is that, in the nurturing of children to adolescence, there is the very close link between the student, home and the school. The one-to-one relationship between the student and the class teacher reinforces this link. Parents in general are inordinately grateful for a year in their children’s school lives that is happy, stimulating and enriched by positive learning experiences. As children mature into mid to later adolescence, there is a tendency to move beyond the home in search of their own independence, so the dynamics of the home-school and teacher-student relationships change. You can observe phenomena such as this *in situ* as indicators of accomplished practice; you cannot require it, or measure it.

A further area of interest untapped by the *NSW Quality Teaching Awards*, and an area where recipients of the award could shed much light, is what it takes to really connect with students at each of the stages of schooling. While there are commonalities among good teachers generally with regard to quality teaching, there are undoubtedly personal traits, even idiosyncrasies in the ‘makeup’ of individual accomplished teachers, whether they be in primary or secondary school. Unpacking this thought further, for instance along gender lines, raises additional questions. For example, it is not at all uncommon to hear it said that Year 9 boys value and respond to their teachers in ways significantly different from Year 9 girls. To what

extent, if at all, is this true? Are there significant differences in these responses depending on the gender of the teacher? What are the commonalities and what are the differences?

A further, untapped area of research where the *NSW Quality Teaching Award* could also shed some light relates to the question of context and place. Why is it that some teachers thrive in (say) a remote rural community and others do not? What special knowledge, attributes and capabilities are required to fully integrate with local communities? Exploring accomplished teaching practice as it relates to place and context and working with accomplished teachers in this regard holds much promise.

From our research and our conversations with teachers, it continues to remain axiomatic to us that any process that purports to identify and validate quality teaching in awards such as the QTA must be thoroughly grounded in that practice both retrospectively (by way of professional learning portfolios) and concurrently (by way of site visits). It also remains axiomatic that validation of quality teaching practice be triangulated through processes where students, parents and caregivers, colleagues and supervisors all have an opportunity to share their views. If this much could be achieved by volunteers involved in the QTA processes working with teachers who volunteered to nominate for the award, one can only imagine what might be achieved by way of a well-resourced and culturally-supported initiative.

#### iv. **Growing cultures of highly accomplished teaching practice.**

What motivates teachers to “step out from the crowd” and to seek recognition for accomplished practice? In Part 2 above, we put forward the view that the most significant factor was that of personal encouragement by significant others in the life of the teacher. Our further research (McCulla, Dinham and Scott, 2007) also revealed a number of other important characteristics that have implications for growing cultures of highly accomplished practice.

##### Trust in the processes of identifying and validating accomplished teaching.

Respondents in our study were invited to reflect on the process of the QTA with a view to identifying positive or negative aspects of it. Invariably, respondents felt comfortable with the process and were supportive of it. This was consistent across all sectors and years of awards.

*The whole thing was positive.* (Primary teacher, metropolitan)

*It was a really positive thing, professionally and personally...It is a positive thing that stays with you. It gives you good career opportunities.* (Primary teacher, metropolitan).

*Referees reports? Easy. Portfolio? I worked on it with my referees' support to really reflect my values. Site visit? I thought it might be a bit like the old days of inspection. This was more my expectation. What do they [the QTA team] want to see? As soon as they became part of the lesson I relaxed. It was very collegial. One [QTA team member] was an expert in [the subject]. She gained ideas and gave ideas. The other offered great insights into kids.* (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)

*I couldn't fault the process. I had some initial meetings [in the TAFE Institute] and support of [TAFE] mentors. As for the site visit, the people [QTA team] were great. I hardly knew they were there. The site assessors must really blend in with the teaching to be effective.* (TAFE teacher, metropolitan)

*It is a great process. ...the quality of the people involved...Although potentially traumatic, the trauma is minimalised. The site visit is essential. The way the site visit is carried out is essential.* (University teacher, metropolitan)

### Capacity building and sustainability

Recipients of QTAs generally felt a positive pressure to maintain their teaching practice at a high standard. Some felt that the award reaffirmed and validated their teaching practice as being of “quality”; others welcomed the peer recognition and endorsement that the Ministerial award and involvement with the Australian College of Educators provided. Some saw it as a basis for professional reflection and personal renewal; others as a challenge to sustain peak performance.

*Having the guidelines of what is considered to be quality practice has helped reinforce to me what I should be trying to obtain in my own practice. It [the QTA] gave me confidence... acknowledgment of something professional I would not have got anywhere else. It is more than colleagues saying “you're doing a really good job”; it is beyond collegial relationships. It comes from the profession itself. It is very special. It is not something I tell people about- “I got a QTA Award!”*(Primary teacher, metropolitan)

*It made me examine what I was doing and why. Any of the trivia [in my teaching] went by the board. I could see against the [QTA] criteria why some of the things I was doing were working. My teaching is now more concise. Some of the things really worked for me. Now I can see why. It [the QTA process] brought clarity to what I was doing.* (Primary teacher, rural)

*I'm more aware that people are looking. I learnt [from reflecting on practice through the QTA process] that kids are much more astute observers of teaching practice than teachers give them credit for doing. Kids can feel really supported or hurt by what we say in the classroom.* (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)

Previous studies with QTA recipients (see Dinham & Scott, 2003b) also highlighted this point, including self-generated pressure to take a more active role in the profession beyond the classroom. Thus, the QTA provided something to “live up to” for most recipients with their influence spreading to other teachers with whom they came into contact.

“Contributions to the professional learning of others” is one of the key criteria against which applications for NSW award were assessed. The question was asked as to how and in what ways, if at all, being a recipient of an award for quality teaching changed this relationship. As a broad generalization, being a recipient appears to have led to being perceived as having greater status with regard to teaching and learning matters, and to requests to be involved in more policy-related initiatives.

*I'm [now] regarded by teachers in other faculties as a “senior teacher”... “Can I get your advice on?...How am I teaching?...How can I do this better?”. People refer other people to me. They preface it by saying “You got that QTA award, could you help me?” Before it was simply “Could you help me?”*  
(Secondary teacher, metropolitan).

It was also apparent from our research that a number of QTA recipients were taking active roles in mentoring others in their development of more accomplished practice, sometimes with QTA nomination in mind.

Having reflected on the QTA process and life since the award, recipients were asked what advice they would give to anyone thinking of putting themselves forward for recognition for more accomplished levels of professional practice generally. Respondents were universally positive in their responses:

*Do it. Be mindful that there has to be a commitment to the process. Do it well. Self promote. Do it when you know you deserve it.* (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)

*Put anxiety or hesitation aside. Think about...genuinely...how you see yourself as a teacher. Put rhetoric aside. Be true to yourself and present your strengths. Take the opportunity.* (Primary teacher, metropolitan)

Respondents also offered a number of practical suggestions, specifically when asked what advice they might give to younger teachers demonstrating or developing accomplished practice.

*You absolutely should [put yourself forward]. The hardest thing is to gather up all the little bits you need...Teachers have these things but they are all over the place. A mentoring process would be great. I am working with a colleague at present.* (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)

*I think the best thing is that if you can't (move forward)- if you've got the passion and drive and it's not happening in the school then it's about searching outward...Look at other avenues if you can". But I do think, you know, principals are changing. I think they're becoming a lot more focused on looking for leadership potential and guiding and assisting and sharing. So hopefully that is changing.* (Primary teacher, metropolitan).

*Number one, grab every opportunity with open arms. That's my number one. Don't be intimidated by those who don't share your passion and drive. You have to actually stay strong around those people because they can be very- you know, they will try and knock the tall poppies down. Continue to aspire to great things it's- you know, just keep a positive attitude and just keep aspiring and keep going for it. Positive mentors are absolutely essential. (Primary teacher, metropolitan)*

## **Summary**

From a longitudinal perspective, the research showed how nominations came forward for the most part from schools, TAFE colleges and universities where there were strong workplace learning cultures (McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007). It was a natural corollary for these schools, TAFE colleges and university faculties to want to celebrate such success in the public domain as well as internally. In turn, it could be argued that each of these institutions was getting stronger in what it was doing with regard to promoting quality teaching practice.

Workplace and organizational cultures were the prime determinants as to whether good teachers would come forward and nominate for awards for quality teaching and for recognition of higher order professional accomplishment. As we have noted, it is not something that exemplary teachers have been generally inclined to do as individuals within education cultures in Australia. The significance of informal mentoring in helping good teachers take up the challenge of nomination and in preparing for the award cannot be underestimated in this regard. Given a growing nucleus of teachers who have been recognised in this way, there is a strong basis for promotion of award and recognition schemes by previous recipients, and the involvement of them in assessment processes. An overall sense of professional trust in the processes of identification and validation of accomplished practice is the key.

There are important implications here. For schools, it suggests a conscientious effort will need to be made by principals and school executive, and by other non school-based educational leaders, to purposefully encourage good teachers to step forward for higher-order recognition of professional accomplishment. In some instances, as we have noted, this may be at odds with what is perceived by some principals and executive to be an “egalitarian” workplace culture in which all teachers are viewed as being “equal”.

A fundamental difference in interpretation, as we have also noted, is that within regulatory frameworks that recognise higher orders of professional accomplishment as distinct from

voluntary awards, teachers cannot be denied access to opportunities for career progression. It is to the credit, therefore, of those school leaders who have identified and nurtured accomplished teachers and who have built strong learning cultures in their schools that they have given us all a glimpse of what might be possible through award programs such as the QTA. Overall, we have noted from our research the ripple effect that takes place at a local level through the QTA process and that undoubtedly further contributes to capacity building and sustainability of quality teaching practices. It is to this aspect that we now turn.

#### **4. CELEBRATING AND RECOGNISING THE WORK OF ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS**

##### **Recognition and personal/professional identity**

In this section we focus on what has been learnt to date about how acknowledgement for accomplished teaching practice impacts on the individual and his or her sense of personal identity.

QTA recipients were asked if they would like to share their thoughts on any impact, positive or negative, that being a recipient had had on them personally either within their immediate family or in the wider community. Responses were invariably positive and, in a number of instances, quite moving. While teachers generally do not seek such affirmation, the QTA was greatly appreciated nonetheless and very much so within the context of immediate family and community relations.

Critical reflection has long been held to be a hallmark of exemplary professional practice in teaching (see, for example, Smith & Lovat, 2003) so it is not surprising that recipients valued the reflective process that underpinned the awards. Several respondents pointed to the powerful nature of the reflective processes involved in participating in the QTA with one commenting that the award may well favour reflective teachers. Alternatively, it may well be that the capacity for such deeper reflection is in itself an attribute of professional accomplishment.

Perhaps some of the most useful advice from the respondents to our interviews related to what might be termed “suspending the ego”. The self-effacing nature of many of the QTA recipients outlined above had to be overcome as the nomination moved forward. Several got around this issue by simply looking at themselves objectively, almost in some instances as if they were preparing reports on themselves. Several respondents mentioned the need to “blow one’s own trumpet” in this regard, even if it did go against the grain of their normal practice. It is a reminder that self-promotion has not been a characteristic of teachers, an observation that is re-enforced by the high percentage of award recipients who were encouraged by others to accept nomination, or who accepted nomination and the award on behalf of the team with whom they worked.

Participants saw value in benchmarking their professional practice against peer-adjudicated higher-order standards of professional practice and in the personal reflection that was necessary

in the preparation of the professional learning portfolio. The QTA itself was particularly valued by recipients not so much from the point of any ongoing kudos that may come from being a recipient, but more from the reflective and affirming nature of the selection processes. The award was valued for its transparency, its validity, the peer assessment processes, the coordination by a prominent professional association, and the fact that it was grounded in teaching and the demonstration of teaching practice. It was valued too for its recognition at Ministerial level and for its affirmation in the popular media (McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007).

Having been through the process, QTA recipients were asked to reflect on their feelings when they received the award. To a person, the responses showed the personal satisfaction that had been achieved.

*It was very fulfilling...It was an important recognition (University teacher, metropolitan)*

*It was huge. I came from a NESB family. My parents left [country of origin] with nothing. The only thing for them was to have an education. My parents worked very hard in cleaning jobs to give us a good education. This was the greatest part of the award. For my parents to see me being given an award as a teacher of English. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)*

*Personally, it was the most affirming thing I had ever received as a teacher. The acknowledgment that complete strangers and the state gave me was confidence boosting. (Secondary teacher, rural)*

*I'm married to a farmer. I can only go [to take up a teaching position] as far as I can drive. Working my way up is not my plan. I can only take opportunities as they come...My husband has always accepted that teaching is my great passion but doesn't fully understand it. He thinks it should be a 9-3 job. When the award ceremony came up, my husband couldn't come because of harvest. The ceremony was wonderful. With the community, if you are in there battling for your school and the children, the community is there behind you 100%. But at home it's different. At home it's accepted but not understood. I think that is typical in the farming industry. (Primary teacher, rural).*

Once again these findings appear to us to be significant. While we cannot underestimate the significance of any tangible rewards by way of salary or other benefits that might accompany accreditation at higher levels of professional accomplishment, it is a hallmark of the profession that the most significant reward as seen by respondents was a very personal, professional affirmation of oneself.

## **Recognition and workplace culture**

Recipients frequently commented on the number of other teachers with whom they worked that they believed to be equally deserving, given appropriate encouragement to nominate and support in preparation for the award. This went beyond mere humility or false modesty and could be indicative of a deeper need for a greater number of worthy teachers to be recognized. It also explains why a number of teachers were quite happy to accept nomination and then the award on behalf of the team with whom they worked.

*I felt a combination of things on being nominated. I was thrilled. There was gratitude...shock...privilege...I teach with so many amazing teachers here. I felt honoured...When you receive praise you respond...The only impediment was my hesitation. Why me? I was surprised and flattered. There are so many talented teachers here. (Primary teacher, metropolitan).*

Of some relevance here, a similar finding of “why me?” occurred in a study of teachers identified as highly successful Higher School Certificate teachers in NSW (Ayres, Dinham and Sawyer, 2000).

These are important findings in that they counter criticisms that awards and other forms of recognition of higher-order professional standards are individualistic, competitive and therefore potentially divisive in workplace cultures. As we have seen, strong professional cultures are highly supportive of singling out teachers for nomination in the first place and celebrating public recognition of achievement. In turn, the successful nominee often pays tribute to that workplace professional leaning culture. The two are inter-related and mutually supportive. We did not encounter in our work any evidence of divisiveness brought about by the QTA processes.

### **Celebrating exemplary practice**

An important, symbolic process of affirmation occurred each year by way of an elegant ceremony held at Government House, Sydney (with the exception of one year when the ceremony was held at the Sydney Conservatorium) with the award being presented by the NSW Minister for Education and Training (now Education and Communities) and the NSW Branch President of the College. In a world where excellence in so many other pursuits is publicly acknowledged, the ceremony was seen as an important and public affirmation not just for the recipients but also for the teaching profession in the state. Recipients to a person spoke highly of the value they placed on the evening.

For the first seven years of the NSW award, the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper - through the leadership of Roger Coombs as Editorial Managing Editor and Maralyn Parker as senior education journalist - played a key role in both promoting the award and in publicising the outcomes. Local newspapers followed on with profiles of local recipients.

The support of the *Daily Telegraph* was mentioned by several recipients in an equity context, specifically as it related to rural and/or lower socio-economic communities. Reading in “*the Tele*” about their teacher getting a Ministerial award for accomplished teaching meant a lot to those communities in providing assurance that the quality of education their students was receiving was equal to that of students in other parts of the state.

*The QTA had a great impact in terms of quality [in this rural school]. It made some parents re-think about sending their kids away from the area to school. (Secondary teacher, rural)*

*Being in “The Tele” was very powerful to our [western Sydney] populace. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan)*

There was a feeling, among several of the recipients that more could be done to publicise the awards.

*I saw all those wonderful recipients [at the Government House ceremony]. I don't think they get the air play they deserve. There is some really good stuff there that should have been in a few more publications. People still don't know what it involves; who got it in the past...It needs to be splashed about in a few more publications... It was good of the Tele to put stuff up, but that was essentially the end of it. (Secondary teacher, metropolitan).*

These findings were of particular interest given the unassuming nature of many of the recipients discussed above. They demonstrate that a once-off and high quality presentation ceremony is highly valued by recipients at a personal level, and that there is a willingness for the greater good of schools/workplaces and the teaching profession for their achievements to be shared more widely across various forms of media and events.

## 5. RECOGNITION AND CAREER PATH DEVELOPMENT

Implicit in all statements of professional teaching standards is the notion of some degree of career path development and progression. A logical question which follows is one of how and in what ways, if at all, does being recognised for the quality of one's teaching influence career path development?

Our initial research (McCulla, Dinham & Scott, 2007) again showed that there were several categories into which responses fell. First, there were those recipients who were content with their current teaching roles. Participating in the *NSW Quality Teaching Awards* was part of that. Secondly, there were those who, motivated by being a recipient of the award, tried their hands at more administrative leadership roles but realized their true vocation was in the classroom. Third, there were those who sought and gained promotion. While the links drawn between being a recipient of a *NSW Quality Teaching Award* and the gaining of a promotion were sometimes tenuous, what is apparent is that a certain confidence and credibility came from the award.

There is unquestionably a time when recipients achieved a higher profile immediately after receiving acknowledgement for accomplished teaching. Acknowledgement brought the recipient to the attention of others in the employing organisation, with the result that invitations to speak at conferences and serve on committees followed - a situation referred to in a previous study as the "hidden treasure" syndrome (Dinham, 2002).

What is of considerable interest in relation to career path progression is that a number of recipients felt intuitively that they had reached a point in their career path where deep reflection on where they had come from, how they were progressing, and where they might move to from here would be of considerable benefit. The awards coincided with this felt need and provided a vehicle through which it could be addressed.

A further study (McCulla, 2010; 2011) focused on the third category outlined above; that is, teachers who sought and gained promotion. The study identified 15 teachers from the overall cohort of 243 primary and secondary recipients of the award who had made the transition from classroom to formal positions of school leader as principal. At a time when succession to formal positions of school leadership is high on national agendas, and when concerns are often raised as to why insufficient numbers of teachers feel motivated or equipped to undertake school leadership roles, the study was motivated by the question of what could be learnt from the

individual stories of teachers identified through the QTA process who had made the journey from classroom to principal's office, and of what they shared in common in their collective journeys.

There is a compelling logic in the notion that our most accomplished teachers could progress to formal positions of school leadership as principals and school executives if given the right kinds of support. After all, one might argue, the very knowledge, understanding, skills and professional values of being a good classroom teacher- a focus on student learning; the capacity to develop teams; ongoing professional learning; good parent and community relations and so forth- are fundamental to whole-school leadership. In recent years this "compelling logic" has been given the increased impetus of a considerable research base. (See, for instance, McKinsey and Company, 2007; 2010). All of that is not to say, of course, that good teachers automatically make good principals - given the development necessary to do the job effectively. It does, however, raise the question of what we can learn from accomplished teachers who have made that transition.

The subsequent study revealed that the respondents had much in common, particularly with regard to the informal mentoring relationships and professional networks that had been instrumental in each teacher's career path progression. A summary of some of the key findings follows.

- Few respondents had any leadership ambitions while in the classroom. Being a school principal simply was not on the radar.
- Few, if any, had any real understanding as classroom teachers of the principal's role. Respondents to a person acknowledged a genuine love of classroom teaching as their prime focus.
- As a turning point, an interest in career path progression had been provoked, motivated and supported primarily (once again) by "significant others" in the life of the teacher rather than by the teacher themselves. Significant others included principals, system administrators such as school education directors, and even QTA personnel who recognised leadership potential.
- In return, respondents viewed these significant others as "mentors" although no formal mentoring relationship existed.

- The transition from classroom to non-classroom based positions of leadership was characterised in general more by serendipity than any deliberate strategy or plan for career path progression.
- Respondents were motivated for the most part by the teaching and learning aspects of the leadership roles they took up rather than the perceived status of the role.
- Contrary to what might be expected, the transition of an accomplished teacher to a formal position of school leadership as a principal or school executive was not necessarily an easy one. While having credentials that demonstrated excellence in classroom teaching played a role, it was a factor among several that determined whether the applicant would be successful at interview or not.
- For the accomplished teacher, a key motivating factor was the degree of perceived “fit” between the teacher’s perception of what was important in teaching and learning and the perceived needs of a school community. In this sense, the school was seen to “find the right person” rather than the converse, a finding that reasserts both the influence and importance of place and context in school staffing.
- School choice and career path mobility were also strongly influenced by gender and biographical factors.
- The most prominent factor impacting on upward mobility of a number of primary respondents was a predisposition to make choices that kept their professional work anchored in classroom practice. For most, this oriented their leadership roles to smaller rather than larger schools often combining teaching with the principalship of these schools and thus creating its own “glass ceiling” with regard to transition to the principalship of larger schools.
- While some principals were highly supportive of the accomplished teacher’s career mobility, other principals were not. This was attributed to varying combinations of the “tall poppy syndrome”; the need to provide stability in their own school by not losing good staff; or the perception that there was a “right” way to work your way up through the various promotion positions, as they themselves had done, and short-cuts or fast tracking were not to be encouraged.
- The classroom skills that had been demonstrated in attaining a state award for quality teaching- student-centredness; problem solving; ongoing professional learning; capacity to build interpersonal relationships with parents and community- all stood the respondents in good stead as they moved into leadership roles in smaller school environments and in one sense became extensions of their classroom teaching activities.

- The professional learning required to undertake the leadership role was developed through a virtual tapestry of activity that included various combinations of employer-provided professional development courses, professional networks, personal learning initiatives, and some exposure to postgraduate study. Foremost among the professional learning opportunities that were valued were the informal mentoring relationships developed particularly with other principals or other senior, non school-based personnel.
- Once in a leadership role, these relationships continued to be highly valued with regard to just-in-time learning needs associated with managing and leading the school.
- Some accomplished teachers acknowledged the struggle required to let go of the sense of control that comes from good classroom teaching practice, and the rewards and personal fulfilment that come from direct feedback of students, parents and community, and were learning how to move to the more distributive forms of leadership that larger school environments require.

Having an award for quality teaching was seen to be beneficial to the QTA recipients in the various leadership roles they came to occupy in promotional positions. They felt that they had credibility, and were seen by others to have credibility, in setting high expectations for teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Being the recipient of an award also provided the basis and credibility for challenging underperforming teachers for a number of respondents.

*I do love teaching. And I suppose that getting the Quality Teaching Award was the best thing. That actually verified that I was a good teacher. You know what I mean? I don't want it to sound like it's- ...say I'm fantastic. But, you know, all these other people think you're doing a good job. And in both my last school and this school people say "I would love to work with you in a classroom"...*

*Interviewer:* So it's like a stamp of quality in a sense- as the name suggests. Did it give you more confidence?

*Oh definitely...When you actually received the award and then you moved schools you were able to say a) I'm here because I have been recognized as a good teacher and, b) I'm not prepared to accept second-rate teaching. And what I'm saying is accurate because I've demonstrated this. I can prove it... I can now say I know this can be done. I know that there's no- you know, there's no excuses when you're teaching. Or, you know, I'm not prepared to accept them. I don't know- if I had been a mediocre teacher I might accept mediocrity- you know what I mean? But I don't and the staff know that. And that's fine- they rise to the challenge.... I haven't had anyone rebel yet [laughter]. (Respondent 3)*

*The award was really good for me. It was an affirmation that I was doing all the right things. That I was making a difference to students. I really always do try to do 110% but I keep refining my ways so that I get the best out of students. I really do believe that it's quality teaching that makes the difference, nothing else. The quality teacher in front of the class is the most important factor in the whole thing. That's virtually my philosophy. It's there all the time. I've used that. To be honest, when I came into this school there wasn't a lot of quality teaching going on. I was quite aghast at what was not happening and I thought what have I let myself in for? But I slowly started to make changes and showed parents how the*

*students should be taught, how they could respond and how they could achieve. And this year particularly the parents have just been gob-smacked as to what they students could achieve, and what the students are doing, and how well they are going and how happy they are at school. I'm really using that quality teaching award to show how much we can make a difference (Respondent 10)*

Other than in the setting of high expectations, the tangible value of the award to career path progression was variable depending on the context in which promotion was being sought. In some contexts this tangible expression of accomplished teaching was valued and acknowledged; in others this was less the case. Recipients of the award continued to value it highly at a personal level, as we have already noted, for the reflective capacity on professional practice and personal affirmation it provided.

The study of these accomplished teachers suggested that the journey to the principalship for the most part is deeply personal, biographical, incremental and developmental rather than pre-determined, lock-step or even aspirational. The experience of these accomplished teachers might be described as more a career path meander than a definitive career path plan. If this sample could be shown to be the case more widely, it would place far more weight than hitherto has been placed on the quality of the social networks and mentor relationships with which the accomplished teacher becomes involved professionally. This is not to underplay the importance of employer-developed succession strategies and their related professional development programs preparing teachers for the principalship and supporting them within it, or of postgraduate study. These are, of course, essential. Rather, based on the findings of this study, it is to suggest that policy developers and program planners need to take into consideration the social, inter-personal and relational dynamics in the design of their programs, integrating them in the learning content and cultures they provide.

Social networks that stimulate, support and sustain are consistent with Capra's (2002) analysis of schools and school systems as "living systems" that are interconnected by way of cohesive diversity rather than mechanical alignment. There is therefore, according to Fink (2010), an interplay and a necessary point of balance between "design" (usually defined in terms of government policy, plans and structures) and "the innate human urge for emergence" to be free, creative and liberated. The challenge at all levels is to find the balance. This is just as true for award and recognition programs centred on accomplished practice.

Social networks are integral to concepts of distributed, teacher leadership (Sachs, 2007; Harris, 2008). If anything, this aspect of our research underscored the importance of the informal

mentoring relationships to leadership preparation that arise from formal structures, given the right circumstances. It has suggested that much more can be done to provide developmental opportunities for leadership for our accomplished teachers.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The research carried out over a decade in the *NSW Quality Teaching Award* provided a basis both for critical reflection on practice and for furthering our understanding of the ways in which the work of accomplished teachers might be identified, validated and recognised. This section draws together some of the implications of that research while also acknowledging its limitations.

### **Policy and infrastructure**

The NSW experience showed that it is possible to identify annually up to 40 or so accomplished teachers by way of professional learning portfolios and site visitations and to do so from a relatively modest funding base of \$50 000 to \$60 000 per annum. Certainly the in-kind voluntary work of members of the Australian College of Educators as well as support from employing authorities in the way of staff time each added additional resources. It is in the latter context that the work of the Awards and Recognition Unit of the NSW Department of Education and Communities requires a special mention for the invaluable administrative support for the implementation of the QTAs that was provided by that Unit.

Several key points need to be made at this juncture. First, it seems essential to us that the identification and recognition of accomplished teaching practice be seen to be genuinely cross-sectoral and supported by all parts of the profession. Having the Australian College of Educators co-ordinate the awards in NSW through a representative steering committee – involving educators from early childhood, Government, Catholic and Independent primary and secondary schools, TAFE and academe - was certainly a bonus in this regard. To retain total independence would have required additional funding for administrative staff to be attached to the College in addition to the funding provided for the operational aspects including portfolio assessment and the short-listing of applicants, site visits and the award ceremony. Being perceived by teachers to be acting in good faith on behalf of the profession, and having the resources to do so, are key enabling conditions of success along with an overall trust in the validity of the selection processes.

Secondly, and in an ideal world, adequate resources would also enable succession within the award structures so that successful applicants might be an even more integral part of future

assessment and validation processes and have access to appropriate professional development activities to help them to do so. This concept fits neatly with the need we have identified for our accomplished teachers to have more access to leadership development opportunities and roles in mentoring, and being mentored by, others.

Third, highly visible publicity and promotion are essential so that there is an impact on all schools. It is of no small significance that the overall numbers of teachers coming forward for nomination declined in NSW after the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper completed its period of sponsorship. Web-based promotion is useful but by itself is insufficient in a professional world where word of mouth promotion through local networks is also essential. Local networks need to be activated by both publicity and strong cultural support from leaders in the organisation as we have noted.

As a fourth point we would caution against reticence with regard to the use of professional learning portfolios for demonstrating professional accomplishment. Those considering such processes would be well advised to seriously consider the use of professional learning portfolios both as a rich developmental and professional learning tool for reflection on practice, and as a demonstration of professional accomplishment. Our evidence for this position comes in this instance from the supportive voices of the teachers themselves who were recipients of the NSW award.

Finally, we would also observe that to be effective in reaching a wider pool of teachers demonstrating accomplished teaching practice of the size we have indicated at the commencement of this paper, and to develop sustainable practice at the higher-order levels of professional standards frameworks, would also require a substantial scaling up of resources supporting the initiative.

### **School and organizational cultures**

Regulatory frameworks that encourage good teachers to present for recognition for higher levels of professional accomplishment will require processes that attempt to ensure teachers have equal opportunity to do so and that they are not inhibited or discouraged in their application by unsatisfactory workplace cultures over which they have no real control.

We are also conscious that the point we have reached in this evolution as higher order professional standards are defined and introduced nationally is in itself part of a change process. As with most change processes, it will be reliant on adequate resource infrastructures, strong cultural support from school-based and non school-based educational leaders, and professional trust in the overall processes. It will also depend on the value of the change being demonstrated by early adopters in schools to teaching and to student learning. Our research indicated that this was happening in the QTA at a local level within specific school communities where nominations were successful, but not extending across schools generally to a point where attainment of higher order standards was recognised and valued in career path mobility and development. It is in this aspect that scaled up work in the area beyond awards such as the QTA has much to offer. There are important implications for educational leaders in ensuring that a supportive culture is developed where higher order professional standards are encouraged, supported and demonstrated through performance review and development processes, promoted and widely acknowledged publicly, and recognised in merit selection processes that clearly contribute to career path progression.

There is also the question of appropriate financial remuneration and other rewards for teachers who demonstrate higher orders of professional accomplishment beyond that which might be expected for professional competence and registration. While we would support remuneration in principle (see Business Council of Australia report, 2010), it is an area that is beyond the scope of this paper to address in detail. Here we have simply noted from our research that one cannot underestimate the power of the personal professional affirmation that recognition of higher-order professional accomplishment brings. In so doing, it is appropriate to record here that successful applicants for the QTA also received \$500 from the *Daily Telegraph* during its period of sponsorship. Sponsorship then continued with Lenovo by way of a provision of a laptop computer to successful applicants. Both were appreciated by QTA recipients. Developments such as these also raise the question of the role corporate sponsorship does and might play in value-adding to award and recognition programs.

Our research showed that, beyond the symbolic acknowledgement of accomplished professional practice, school leaders at all levels have key roles to play in identifying and mentoring emergent potential among the teachers with whom they come in contact, and in providing opportunities for them to experience leadership roles and responsibilities. Informal mentoring relationships are the lifeblood of identifying accomplished teaching practice,

supporting applications for award or accreditation purposes, and of developing leadership potential. Certainly our case study research in the university sector on the interplay between award recipients and workplace colleagues gave insights into the power and influence that these ongoing “quiet conversations in small circles” about quality teaching can have in developing workplace cultures (McCulla, Scott & Dinham, 2009).

## **Research**

Our research focused on the experiences of teachers who nominated for the *NSW Quality Teaching Award* as well as on a relatively small group of teachers who, as award recipients, were identified as having made the transition from classroom to principal’s office. If we were to summarise the major implications in identifying, validating and recognising the work of accomplished teachers that arise from what we have found to date, it would be these.

1. Agree on what it is that is really important in the identification, validation and recognition of accomplished teaching and do not be persuaded by expediency to deviate from these.
2. Develop a program which at its core is reflective and developmental rather than simply judgmental.
3. Evaluate what it is that it is important to evaluate, rather than assess only what is easy to assess.
4. Ensure a resource base that is equal to the task.
5. Publicise the processes and the outcomes by way of print and electronic resources direct to all schools.
6. Ensure that the processes are made known to, and receive, strong cultural support from school leaders in the organization.
7. Integrate the processes within performance review and development schemes to further acknowledge achievement.
8. Celebrate and publicly acknowledge the work of recipients.

9. Provide for program continuity and development by involving teachers who achieve accomplished status in the short-listing and selection processes of other candidates for a defined period of time after their award.
10. Highlight and respect accomplished teaching in job selection processes.
11. Integrate and provide leadership opportunities for accomplished teachers in beyond-school professional networks as a key contributor to succession planning.
12. Build a concurrent research program in which teacher feedback is central.

There are other policy-related matters to which attention needs to turn. We have remarked earlier that the place of awards for good teaching has always been ambivalent in Australian education, even to a point of holding somewhat of a “Cinderella” status (McCulla, 2009). With the advent of professional standards frameworks and higher order levels of recognition of professional accomplishment, the question now is one of how awards for good teaching might continue to be encouraged in all their manifestations and provide forms of evidence for the attainment of professional standards. It is for these reasons that the Steering Committee for the QTA Steering Committee recommended to the Minister and to the College that 2011 would be the final year of the award in NSW to allow time to reflect on the research to date and national developments, and to consider how quality teaching might best be supported by the Australian College of Educators in NSW in the years beyond.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our intention in the *NSW Quality Teaching Award* was to provide sufficient scope for teachers to be able to demonstrate individual approaches and creativity in their work grounded in a broad framework of knowledge, skills and understanding related to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and professional values. For the successful applicants, it was the triangulation of referees' reports, professional learning portfolios and site visits which validated their accomplishments against a broad statement of professional standards.

It is to be hoped that the research undertaken in NSW as part of the *NSW Quality Teaching Award*, along with other related research, will contribute some insights into the important developments that are before us as we encourage more teachers to be recognized for their professional accomplishment.

This monograph has centred for the most part on the authors' collective work over a ten year period in working and reflecting with teachers on the identification, validation and celebration of quality teaching within a voluntary award process. It is hoped that it makes a contribution to the growing body of research literature that is now emerging nationally and internationally on accomplished professional practice.

We believe that a strength of our study is that, for the first time in the Australian context, research has been able to be carried out over a decade-long period, identifying and working with a group of teachers applying for, being successful in, and being rewarded by a QTA. This has involved a triangulated process of a formal application, including referees reports, the presentation of a portfolio, and an assessment of teaching *in situ* – with all evidence being evaluated within a statement of professional standards. To this end, our work has been grounded in professional practice and in teachers' stories of their working lives. Qualitative in its nature and time consuming in its application, we believe research of this nature to be essential in gaining a true and full understanding of the impact of policy and practice on teachers. That said, we also acknowledge the limitations of our work, specifically its focus on the one jurisdiction and the modest nature of the research program that could be undertaken within the resources that were available. We are also conscious that, longitudinally, there are stories still to be told of, and lessons to be learned from, the subsequent professional progress of the 473 recipients of the *NSW Quality Teaching Award*.

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