OTHER THEMES

Professional Standards and the Quality of Initial Teacher Education

Valdinei Costa Souza[I]
Debra Talbot[II]

[I]Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), Brasília/DF – Brazil
[II]The University of Sydney (USYD), Sydney/NSW – Australia

ABSTRACT – Professional Standards and the Quality of Initial Teacher Education. This article investigates the repercussions of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers on the quality of initial teacher education programs at a relevant Australian university. Methodologically, it uses the case study to analyse, based on dialogism, the data collected in interviews with the academic managers of the courses in focus. The results indicate that the adoption of Standards brings some benefits to the design, structuring and development of these courses, but they also reveal tensions due to the inflexibility in its use by the Australian quality accreditation process, without guaranteeing the necessary space for creativity and innovation in teacher education in different educational contexts.
Keywords: **Teacher Education. Quality. Australia. Professional Standards.**

RESUMO – Padrões Profissionais e a Qualidade da Formação Inicial de Professores. Este artigo aborda as repercussões dos *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* na qualidade dos cursos de formação inicial de uma relevante universidade australiana. Metodologicamente, utiliza o estudo de caso para analisar, com base no dialogismo, os dados coletados em entrevistas com os gestores acadêmicos dos cursos estudados. Os resultados encontrados apontam que a adoção dos *Standards* traz alguns benefícios para a concepção, a estruturação e o desenvolvimento desses cursos, mas revelam também tensões pela inflexibilidade no seu uso pelo processo australiano de acreditação da qualidade, sem garantir o espaço necessário à criatividade e à inovação da formação docente nos diversos contextos educacionais.
Palavras-chave: **Formação de Professores. Qualidade. Austrália. Padrões Profissionais.**

Introduction

Professional competency standards for teachers are advocated by some researchers and multilateral organizations as a strategy to improve the quality of initial teacher education (ITE). Among its defenders, there is the understanding that the definition of teaching competencies allows the construction of shared meanings of teaching quality, guides the formation and professional development of teachers and promotes the consistency and coherence of public policies focused on improving student learning (DET, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2000; OECD, 2013; BIRD, 2012; Cosentino; Sridharan, 2017; UNESCO, 2019).

Analyses, such as the one presented in the report of the International Conference Building a High-Quality Teacher Profession: Lessons from around the world (Schleicher, 2011), encourage and advocate that countries develop educational reforms in order to identify evidence about the performance of their teachers. They argue that educational systems benefit from having concise standards on what teachers should know and be able to do, in order to guide their initial formation, certification and ongoing assessment, as well as their professional development and career progression.

Around the world, countries are implementing educational actions and reforms based on these ideas. In Brazil, between 2019 and 2020, educational reforms focused on teacher training took place, which established professional standards based on a list of competencies expected of teachers as a result of training process (Brazil, 2020a; Brazil, 2020b). In Australia, the educational reform that implemented the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2011) occurred almost a decade before the Brazilian one, strongly inspiring the standards adopted in Brazil and offering a mature empirical field for observing its repercussions on the training system in that country.

From 2015 onwards, Australia stepped up its use of APSTs by making changes to accreditation processes and criteria to ensure that initial teacher education courses visibly developed the teaching competencies outlined in APSTs. From the perspective of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014), the Department of Education and Training (DET, 2015) and AITSL (2015, 2020), these changes seek to ensure the quality of initial teacher training, highlighting the evidence that beginning teachers are ready to work in the classroom immediately after obtaining their diploma (readiness for teaching), in order to impact student learning in schools.

Despite the APST's focus on the quality of initial teacher education and the development of the teaching career, it is necessary to consider that quality, as a concept, can refer to different meanings (Ryan; Bourke, 2018; Harvey; Williams, 2010; Souza, 2017). In this sense, the ideal quality for initial teacher training with the inclusion of APST in Australian accreditation processes may be different from that materialized by the institutions that offer it. Contrasting possible differences and signaling points of tension between the discourse and practice of

APST becomes relevant for the construction of knowledge about the limits and possibilities in the application of this framework aiming at the quality of teacher training, notably when there are countries with similar reforms underway.

Considering this context, this paper analyzes the repercussions of APST on the design, structuring and development of the provision of initial teacher education programs at a traditional Australian university institution. It uses a dialogic approach (Talbot, 2015) based on the work of Bakhtin (1981) to identify the repercussions of APST on the provision of courses at the university analysed, as well as the tensions between the meaning of quality present in official documents on the quality of teacher education in Australia and the perception of the academic body that produces the evidence requested by the accreditation processes.

Teacher Training and Its Meanings of Quality

The concept of quality can be observed from different perspectives (Garvin, 1987; Juran, 1999; Harvey; Williams, 2010), presenting different meanings depending on the context to which it refers (Bourke; Ryan; Lloyd; 2016; Ryan; Bourke, 2018), as well as values, worldview and preferences of those who adopt this concept as an attribute of an object (Souza, 2017). In teacher training, quality can refer to different meanings, grouped in terms of formative conceptions (Robinson; Mogliacci, 2019), traditions (Zeichner, 1993), or metaphors (Ryan; Bourke, 2018). In addition, the quality of teacher training can also be signified through results arising from this training (Cochran-Smith, 2001), without there necessarily being contradictions or exclusions between these aspects or between the perspectives that make up each of them.

In terms of quality as a training concept, Wallace (1991) defined three main models that, following a historical perspective, refer to quality in professional training, in general, and to teacher training in a specific way. The first model, called the craft model, refers to training shaped by practice and experience acquired while working under the supervision of a master who teaches his techniques, guides and advises his students. The second one, the applied science model, is characterized by the mobilization and application of scientific knowledge constructed to achieve objectives or overcome challenges in professional practice. The third, called the reflective model, seeks to develop professional skills for monitoring the environment, aiming to propose and implement innovative actions when there is no available scientific knowledge or structured techniques to overcome certain problems.

There is also the critical conception of teacher training, defended by authors such as Giroux (1997) and Kincheloe (2008), as well as the perspective of training based on the construction of teacher identity, defended by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). The critical current highlights the understanding of the economic-social context and the reflection on the power of education as an element of transformation in society. The training models aimed at constructing the teacher's identity are based on the analysis of lived experiences, personal biographies

and beliefs and practices of teachers, as well as reflections on how these factors present in the school environment promote, hinder and interfere in motivations, emotions, values, beliefs and teaching practices.

Analyzing all these training approaches, Robinson and Mogliacci (2019) point out that it is difficult to find courses and training programs aligned with any of them in a pure way. In general, hybrid constructions occur that use similar terms, but which can refer to different ideas, or on the contrary, they use different terminologies, but which are based on the same conceptual root. Despite the differences in emphasis between the various possible arrangements of teacher training courses, it is important to highlight that these differences allow us to explore, as stated by Carr (1993), the relationship between the practical and the theoretical, the technical and the scientific, the ethical and the moral, among other possibilities, to generate meaning of quality in teacher training.

In parallel with the quality aspect of teacher training based on training models, it is also possible to identify another aspect that assumes the quality of teacher training from a results perspective, anchored in the competence approach. Exploring this second aspect, Cochran-Smith (2001) suggests three ways to define results associated with the quality of teacher training, namely: a) results as long-term impact; b) results as test scores for teachers; and c) results as professional performance.

Within the scope of long-term impacts, the author groups together a wide range of perspectives that measure the effects of teacher training on their professional performance. As a common point, these long-term results perspectives adopt professional competency standards to guarantee the quality of teacher training, their licensing and certification, as well as the adoption of standardized curricula and the use of student performance in national or international knowledge tests as a valid measure to attribute quality to teachers, the courses where they develop their training and the schools where they work.

Regarding scores on teacher tests, Cochran-Smith (2001) chose to remove them from the set of long-term impacts and presented them as a specific outcome category due to their popularisation as a requirement for licensing to practice the teaching profession in the United States. Teacher tests are used to assess the knowledge accumulated individually by the teacher during their training process and, based on the scores obtained, are also used to assess the quality of the training received. In this sense, teaching tests have been used in many North American states as a parameter for evaluating the quality of initial teacher training courses.

Finally, in relation to the outcome of teacher training as professional performance, Cochran-Smith (2001) points out that, from this perspective, the meaning of quality in training courses is expressed through assessments of teachers' abilities to carry out classroom management activities, even during their training process. According to

Stacey et al. (2019), the perspective of results as professional performance was officially considered in Australia to assess the quality of training courses. In that country, this performance is measured through the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA), considered by AITSL (2021, p. 1) as "a key mechanism by which courses can demonstrate the impact of teachers in training on student learning".

However, it is worth noting that the TPA, as an indicator of the quality of teachers in training and their readiness to act effectively in the classroom, is not yet properly established. Despite the existence of a technical sheet with guidelines on the TPA and general explanations for its measurement, Dinham (2015) clarifies that the use of learning by school students as evidence of the quality of teacher training courses is in the process of being constructed, and there is no reliable methodology to adequately measure this impact.

Considering the characteristics of the results aspect for the meaning of quality in teacher training, it is relevant to highlight the findings of Churchward and Willis (2019). They explored the literature relevant to teacher quality as a result of the training process and found six meanings of this quality, dividing them between visible discourses and obscured discourses. In the group of visible discourses, the quality of teacher training is associated with: a) the readiness to guarantee the learning of school students immediately after training; b) evidence of achievement of professional standards as a product of teacher training; and c) the effectiveness of the teacher in making the right decisions, given the complexity of the teaching process. Dialogically, these visible meanings of quality also expose distortions in the understanding of quality, allowing the formation of the second group of quality discourses, called by Churchward and Willis (2019) obscured discourses, namely: accountability, performativity and the fragility of teaching identity. Accountability because it associates student performance directly with teaching competence, without due consideration of other factors that interfere in this process. Performativity because it addresses teaching competence beyond the assumptions of student learning, associating this learning with performance goals to control the professional conduct of teachers. Fragility of identity due to the low appreciation of teaching experiences, the focus on learning throughout the career, the standardisation of beliefs and the understanding of what it means to be a quality teacher, as well as what is needed to become a facilitator of quality teaching.

Thus, based on the understanding of quality as a concept dialogically constituted by the context in which it is applied, the following sections seek to highlight the relationships between the meanings of quality that emerge from the Australian accreditation rules, structured through the APST, and their impact on the provision of initial teacher education courses at a relevant university in that country.

Methodological Approach

The dialogic approach (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984) was adopted to structure this investigation. The intentionality of this choice lies in the perspective of valuing the historical, theoretical and legal contexts that allow us to understand the quality of initial teacher education as a concept subject to ambiguous meanings that carry different connotations, according to the time and space in which they are inserted (Ryan; Bourke, 2018).

Despite the lack of a theoretical-analytical systematisation of Bakhtinian writings as a research method, the study carried out by Talbot (2015) organizes the central aspects for this application to occur. In this organisation, the 'statement' is highlighted as the basic unit of dialogic analysis, operationalised by a word or a sentence that reveals opinions, points of view and value judgments, in addition to tensions and oppositions in the discourse, which bring the essence of the object studied. Thus, the analysis was directed towards answering the following research question: what are the repercussions of APST on the provision of Australian initial teacher education courses, taking as a reference the meaning of quality produced by the contexts of the educating institution and the accreditation processes that evaluate this provision?

In the methodological design of the study, it was decided to explore and obtain a deeper understanding of the relationship between APST and the quality of initial teacher education provision through a case study. The chosen institution is part of the "Group of Eight", formed by traditional Australian universities that maintain large investments in research. Additionally, the research institution is ranked in the top five in Australia and top 30 in the world for teacher education degrees, according to Times Higher Education. The courses analysed offer, within Australian parameters, initial teacher education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for primary education and secondary education.

The choice of the case study is consistent with the research objectives, in addition to explaining the limits of the findings, their validity (conceptual, internal and external), as well as the possibility of supporting other investigations. The actors interviewed were selected according to the guidelines of Palinkas et al. (2015) for intentional sampling. People who could provide information for the most effective use of available time and resources were identified and selected, using the following criteria: a) be part of the teaching staff of the institution researched; b) have experienced the creation or development of initial training courses at the university with the implementation of APST; c) be exercising leadership or management positions of initial training programs offered; and d) have expressed availability and willingness to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner. The total sample size was five course directors[1], all of them women, identified in this research through pseudonyms,

whose testimonies (or opinions) provided a view of the Initial Teacher Education Chair at the university analyzed.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed in English. They were later translated into Portuguese to be included in the Portuguese version of this article. Following the structure systematised by Talbot (2015), information was sought in the interviewees' responses about the aspects of the courses affected by APST, labeling them as themes or theoretical categories to reveal adhesions, contradictions or even tensions present in the material analysed. The main findings are presented in the following section.

APST and its Repercussions

From the set of data obtained through interviews, it was observed that the introduction of APST in the Australian regulatory environment has provoked, in the courses analysed, the need for massive production of evidence on the effective development of the skills required for graduate teachers. Paula (pseudonym for a program director) clarifies that she

> [...] refers a lot to APST, to guide [...] and support the development of skills. [...] there is an explicit mapping of what we do, including weekly seminars, tutorials and assessment tasks in relation to APST (Paula).

In order to produce such evidence, new and old courses promote a large number of adjustments in their pedagogical projects and in their offering structures to make the APST competencies visible in the course documentation and to be able to record their fulfillment in the checkboxes of the accreditation forms.

> All of the [competency standards] were mapped to see where the gaps were in the course. And then we tried to think about, well, where could [this competency] authentically sit? Why is it underrepresented? Why aren't we practicing this or assessing that? (Laura).

In her speech, Rose (a pseudonym for a bachelor's degree course coordinator who has other important administrative functions) summarises that the APST led to the "practical impact of having to change the course to ensure compliance with all competency standards in a very visible way". In short, Rose says that APST "changed the way we thought about what we did and didn't do in our courses". However, in the opinion of the interviewees, these adjustments do not always reflect effective improvements in the education conditions of students, triggering three sets of tensions, highlighted in the subsections that follow.

Tension 1: quality guide vs. bureaucratic complexity

The first tensioning of the repercussions of APST in the courses analysed in this research exposes, on the one hand, APST as a guide for the design, development and delivery of courses to ensure that graduates develop the defined skills - reinforcing the predictions of reports from multilateral organisations (Schleicher, 2011) and documents on the accreditation process (AITSL, 2015, 2020). On the other hand, they reveal APSTs as precursors of paperwork and complexification of the

planning and development of these courses, in an unforeseen dysfunction or side effect.

From the perspective of APST as a guide, the interviewees refer to critical course activities and assessment criteria or rubrics in a way that is aligned with the discourse of competence described by Whitty and Willmott (1991). According to them, APSTs contribute to clarifying the content, skills and attitudes that teachers in training need to demonstrate, guiding both the organisation of disciplines and the learning assessment process. The statements by Alice (pseudonym for coordinator of a master's degree in teaching) and Rose illustrate how APSTs are able to transparently express to future teachers what knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to develop and demonstrate:

> We have linked the standards to each of the outcomes and assessments. [...] We try to let students know what standards they can demonstrate when they are doing an assessment task (Alice).

> And then you can say [to the student teacher], 'These are the things you need to demonstrate that you know and that you can do; this is the document that your supervisor will have when he or she is evaluating you' (Rose).

The participants also emphasise that APSTs allow for the establishment of dialogues with undergraduates in an explicit and targeted manner, especially in professional experience disciplines (internships). For Laura, "professional experience is the cornerstone of APST." Alice adds: "in our professional studies courses, all standards are explicitly covered". In this sense, there is a positive view of the APSTs themselves as course conductors and advisors to develop, through the articulation of theory-practice-evaluation, important skills for the future exercise of teaching, as exemplified by the statements of Paula and Maria (pseudonym for a coordinator of one of the master's courses in teaching):

> I find it very helpful for students when I make connections: 'This is the professional competency and this is where we're headed.' And then I help them make sense of what we're doing in the course and where they're headed (Paula).

> If we didn't have the competency standards, how would we do that? I don't know, I mean, it would be chaos, more or less, I think. [...] I think the standards help our students become better teachers (Maria).

However, this view is strained when the interviewees highlight the imposing force of the APSTs through the accreditation process. According to them, the exaggerated focus on the visibility of competency standards results in distortions in the structuring of courses that range from the simple bureaucratic marking of checkboxes on accreditation forms, to the complexity of the work of teaching staff and even to the restriction of creativity in the offering of courses.

As observed by Pantić and Wubbels (2010), Biesta (2015) and Robinson and Mogliacci (2019), the responses forwarded within the competence model favor standardisation, in a restriction to pluralities or innovations existing in the different contexts in which they are established. However, the data from this research indicate that such restrictions were not located in the competency standards themselves, but rather in the bureaucratic apparatus implemented for the purpose

of collecting the evidence inherent to the model. This understanding is corroborated by the statements of Rose and Alice when they highlight that the perspective of demonstrating competencies leads to restrictions on creativity in the development of the program design, limits the freedom of choice of education paths by students and hinders the organic integration of content. According to the reports, the nature of such restrictions is structural and not necessarily related to the pedagogical approach. Some excerpts from the interviews support this understanding:

> Look, in order to meet all of the requirements of our accreditation, we have stand-alone math, stand-alone science, stand-alone creative arts, they're pretty isolated to make sure that we meet all of those requirements and they're focused on those curriculum areas. We created a space in the fourth year to take a creative and integrated technology-rich approach to solving problems related to students' learning needs. And to focus more on general capabilities and higher-order thinking skills rather than ticking things off the resume. So that's our only space that we've been able to fit in. We'd like to have more of those spaces (Alice).

> You can't respond to student feedback because you can't actually change things without having to juggle or go through a huge amount of paperwork (Rose).

Regarding the reduction of APST to simple bureaucratic visibility, characterized by the checkbox, Maria highlights that

> It's a very top-down control, where the university, which I think is doing a great job, is just trying to check the boxes in a bureaucratic way [...] It becomes a little bit, you know, making the pile of paper look good for the purpose of passing accreditation (Maria).

In this sense, there is an understanding that the relentless search for visibility of APST leads to pure and simple work overload, with repercussions in educational terms, as stated by the interviewees:

> I have 24 hours here and I have to cover these 12 topics, and I have to do it authentically, and I have to do it in a way that makes sense, but it might not make sense. Just check a box [...]. I think the really important thing is the inflexibility of having to meet certain checkboxes (Rose).

> Ah! Just put it on that paper, and not actually put it in this discipline. Well, at least in the discipline, but the department head doesn't know it appeared there... Something like: put it in there; "push" it in there (Maria).

Detailing the complexity for the teaching staff, there is a perception that the accreditation process leads the courses to some degree of dysfunctional development. According to the interviewees, the ways in which APSTs were configured in the accreditation process promotes excessive control over what has been produced in the courses, with negative repercussions on the intensification of the work of teacher educators. In Rose's words:

> If we could separate the idea of what [APSTs] are from the insane amount of bureaucratic and administrative work they generate, then one of those things could be quite positive. But as it is, it's become really reductive, and partly because it's become very time-consuming for people. [...] So it takes time away from us doing things like teaching and meeting the needs of our students and planning our courses and all those things. So it's this extra administrative layer to develop a 900-page document all the way down to the lecture, all the way down to the tutorial, all the way down to the assessment level for each point… It's so heavy (Rose).

It is also important to point out that the perception of an increase in teaching staff's workload, resulting from the need to make APST visible, is not restricted to the university. The interviewees mentioned that accreditation panels are impacted by the huge amount of evidence required to complete the accreditation process. Rose also points out that this work is voluntary, making it even more difficult for the teacher educators who participate in it.

> And then it's volunteers who actually sit on the panels [...]. So it's real how much time it takes from people. And teachers are not paid to sit on these accreditation panels. Teachers are not paid to do the training [to participate]. This is something that senior teachers do to serve the profession that is above and beyond what most people would ever be asked to do without any kind of payment. It just shows how people view teachers as servants (Rose).

Thus, this first tension ends up opposing, on the one hand, the production of any type of evidence that the skills were developed by the students during their education process (bureaucratic objective) and, on the other hand, the ideal configuration of the course to educate competent teachers (pedagogical objective). Therefore, within the scope of the university analysed, the vision of APST as a guide for the planning and development of initial teacher education courses exists, but is out of focus due to the massive demand to give visibility to professional standards, as established by the accreditation process.

Tension 2: common language vs. lack of educational principles

The second tension captured in the interviewees' statements confronts the view of APST as inducing a common language (Loughland; Ellis, 2016) and the fact that the competencies defined in them are configured as an instrumental tool. On the one hand, the analysis of the data presented in the interviews reinforces the idea that APSTs are capable of guaranteeing a common language that can be used to ensure cohesion and consistency of the pedagogical project and the development of initial teacher education courses. In the words of the interviewees:

> One of the reasons standards are good, I think, is because they give us a shared vocabulary, whether I like it or not (Rose).

> They give us an idea of where we are going [...]. They give me something to go back to, to refer to. [...] so this pattern has been very useful to me when I use it to facilitate discussions between the supervising teacher [of the internship] and the student teacher (Paula).

> If people get completely off track and you're like, what are you doing? You can always go back to the standards and it keeps you focused. So if someone has, I don't know, assessments or rubrics or whatever, and you're like, 'What the hell are you doing? Why are you doing this?' Then it's really helpful to say, 'OK, let's go back to the standards' (Maria).

However, interview participants also highlight the limitations of APST and the competency model in defining an educational philosophy. This lack of formative conception is also pointed out by Pantić and Wubbels (2010). Therefore, the common language perspective needs to

be contextualised within the academic community so that real meaning can be given to the planning and development of courses, as Paula and Rose explain:

> It puts on me the responsibility, for example, to understand what education is about before I can understand the essence of the standards. [...] So what it means to know your students, or to know how to teach, to know your content, can be interpreted or thought of very differently. [...]. There is variability in the understanding of what each [competency] means in different contexts. And this will define how people use, implement and evaluate them (Paula).

> My pre-service teachers… We talk about standards all the time. There's no black and white here. It's like it's all shades of gray. It's incredibly complex. And we have big debates in my class about whether standards are good or not because professional standards indicate that we are a profession and we should be able to have a shared language about what we need to know (Rose).

Thus, the second tension exposes the fragility of the competence model to establish educational principles, ethical values and formative conception. Despite this, the data analysed point to the APSTs as a facilitator of interaction between teacher educators, in so far as, they are an operational instrument to facilitate the expression, mediation and understanding of the academic body regarding their preferences, values and vision of quality education.

Tension 3: quality as excellence vs. quality as conformity

The third tension confronts the vision of quality associated with APST as excellence (demonstrated by the readiness of graduates for teaching), with the vision of APST associated with conformity (demonstrated by evidence of compliance with basic requirements). The interviewees highlight that the APST guide the educative actions and decisions of Australian institutions offering initial teacher education courses, assuming the role of a benchmark for their quality, but without guaranteeing innovation or excellence. Rose, Alice and Laura reinforce the fundamental aspect of competency standards in defining what is good or adequate in teacher education, without providing guidance for improvements and, at the same time, limiting innovations.

> So if I think about the way they're structured, students need to be able to do this. But they don't talk about what it looks like when it's done well. It's just a foundation, you know, it's a foundation. You need to demonstrate that you can do it. Period. (Rose).

> I'm still surprised by the variety of courses and the quality of graduates that come out of different institutions, even though we're following the standards. So while I think they're a necessary thing, I don't know if they're really achieving what they're supposed to achieve (Alice).

> They are a measure of compliance. And I question whether there is a better way to take advantage of what they offer us than simply complying with the standards (Laura).

The counterpoint present in official documents (AITSL, 2015; 2020; DET, 2015; TEMAG, 2014) that APST have the potential to impact the academic excellence of courses, since they favor the readiness of graduated students to positively impact learning in school education,

is questioned by the participants' statements. Rose and Maria highlight the need for greater reflection on the reality of the possibility of this impact occurring during the education process of future teachers. They note the lack of empirical conditions to make such a measurement, in addition to technical gaps that guarantee the accuracy of what was measured.

Regarding the real conditions for demonstrating readiness for teaching, the interviewees' statements highlight impossibilities inherent to the reality of the education process itself. Maria says: "I understand that there are problems". For example, how can we serve students who are Indigenous if there are no Indigenous people in the classroom? (Maria)". Rose adds several concrete examples and reflections that express the difficulty of educating students who are fully ready to act in any school context, that is, ready to impact the learning of any student, as provided for in the documents of AITSL (2015; 2020), DET (2015) and TEMAG (2014):

> I have third year students, this guy is going to teach in a rural area, two hours from the nearest post office. This other guy is going to teach at a big private school. This one is going to teach at a big school that basically has a pathway to juvenile justice. You know, these are all different classrooms. You can't say, 'Week three, parenting and community class, and that's it. You're ready to go into the classroom.' I mean, you know, the idea that we can guarantee that graduates will be ready [to function effectively in any classroom] in four years is hilarious to me. I mean, [it's hilarious] just the idea that teachers need to be classroom-ready before they start teaching. You could never do that; you know? We really need to think about supporting and guiding those early years. So initial teacher education is the wrong place to talk about classroom readiness. I think classroom readiness has to come in the early years of teaching. But that's just another interview (Rose).

This perception that APSTs are not able to ensure that Australian teachers following initial teacher education are prepared to work in all possible contexts immediately after graduation, expressed by the interviewees, is also present in the studies by Churchward and Willis (2019). Regarding the technical gaps in demonstrating the impact of courses on student learning, the statements highlight problems surrounding the main instrument used for this, the TPA. As the interviewees express:

> In fact, I think this whole conversation [about TPA] has become a bit of a 'check the box' thing (Rose).

> [In the TPA, there are 20, 25 questions in total. Some questions assess up to four or five different competencies, and other questions assess only one competency. Therefore, from an assessment point of view, trying to find out whether the student has met all the professional competencies in this TPA is a nightmare. [...] no one gives you any cheat sheet for this, so there is no formula. I contacted [the consortium of universities on the subject] to ask [...]. At the meeting, they say, 'As long as you pass 50% of the questions, you're fine. There are other institutions that do what you've been doing, making sure that students meet all the standards. "It's up to you," is what the guy tells me. It's like you say for some competencies, 'Oh, it's not that important.' And for other competencies you say, 'This is important.' I was like, 'You've got to be kidding.' There's no priority list among the [professional competency] standards. The standards are there, you have to meet them, whether or not I personally think one standard is more important than another is not for me to say.

They are there and they are equal. But that's what I was told in this meeting. I was like, just shaking my head (Maria).

I don't necessarily have an idea in my head of how [TPA] could happen in a way that would be valid or reliable (Rose).

It is important to emphasise that the interviewees agree on the importance of APST in making students' professional experience during the course more relevant and focused on theory-practice reflection. However, for the interviewees, such importance is not to be confused with teacher readiness for the classroom, nor is there a belief that the TPA demonstrates such readiness. Rose summarises:

The TPA is a one-off assessment, a fundamental assessment. I actually really like the idea of this fundamental assessment. To what extent do we expect that, after five weeks of internship, people will be able to talk about the impact they are having on the learning of [school] students? I think all we can really say, genuinely, is that getting them to do [this reflection on this impact] gives them some practice in how they might have these discussions when they're teachers, right? I don't think you could say that it's really going to give us any kind of reliable data about how our students are impacting students in schools (Rose).

Thus, this third tension highlights the quality brought by APST as a foundation, by evidencing compliance with basic requirements. Quality as formative excellence, provided for by official documents and associated with readiness for teaching, is discredited by the research participants. For them, in addition to concrete empirical limits of educating a teacher who is fully prepared for any type of classroom after the initial education process, the TPA, as an instrument for measuring this quality, is methodologically fragile and incapable of demonstrating the quality projected by the accreditation process.

Final Considerations

APSTs are the core element of the accreditation processes for initial teacher education courses in Australia. The idea that permeates this centrality considers that the quality of initial teacher education can be measured through evidence that preservice teachers are able to positively impact the learning of school students, once the initial teacher education process is completed. In this sense, the competencies defined in the APST for graduate teachers (initial stage of the career) must be visible in the design, structure, development and delivery of the programs, in order to produce evidence that teachers, once graduated, are ready to practice the profession.

Within the scope of this research, the consequences of this centrality in the reality of courses at a relevant Australian university were analysed. The results indicate that the APSTs serve as guides for the planning and development of the courses analysed, organising a common language and favoring the articulation of theory and practice to facilitate the development of the necessary skills for teachers' initial education. At the same time, the exhaustive use of APST in the accreditation process makes their visibility in the structure of programs a prior-

ity, even if to the detriment of creativity, better organisation of disciplines or reasonable levels of complexity and workload of the university teaching staff.

Such repercussions of APST promote some tensions inherent to the context in which they occur. Thus, APST are dialogically, at the same time: i) a guide for planning and developing quality programs and an element that makes the work of academic staff more complex; ii) a reference for the adoption of a common language for the cohesion and effectiveness of the course and a gap in the definition and a choice of educative concepts more appropriate for the development of teaching skills; and iii) an instrument for the conformity of the theory-practice articulation for the development of professional skills of preservice teachers and a hologram of the perspective of readiness for teaching designed for these same preservice teachers at the time of their qualification.

Bakhtin's writings (1981, 1984) help to give meaning to these tensions by highlighting the dialogic interaction between contradictory statements and the context in which they are produced. In the case of the repercussions of APST on university courses in which this interaction of contradictory statements is observed, a constant balance-imbalance-rebalance is perceived that is only capable of producing valid meaning if it is considered in its entirety. Thus, between the readiness of preservice teachers to positively impact the learning of school students, in all school contexts, and the checkbox dynamics experienced by the case study university academics during the accreditation process of its courses, there is a complex truth that needs to be considered without partiality in order to improve initial teacher education.

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[1] In Australia, initial teacher education can take place in Bachelor of Education (Bachelor's degree) or Master of Education (Master of Education) courses, relating to Early Childhood Education, Primary Education or Secondary Education.

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Valdinei Costa Souza holds a PhD in Education (UnB) and is a Senior Analyst in Science and Technology (CAPES).
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5145-043X
E-mail: valdinei.souza@capes.gov.br

Debra Talbot works as a researcher, internship coordinator, and professional learning consultant, translating theory into practice expressed through curriculum and pedagogy for social justice. Her field of research is initial teacher education and professional learning.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1398-3435
E-mail: debra.talbot@sydney.edu.au

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