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**Professional standards, teacher identities and an ethics of singularity**

**Introduction: Teaching in the end-times**

Standards work…by standardizing people and making them into self-monitoring, self-motivating persons who use audit to align themselves with…regulations (Dunn, 2005, p. 189).

Contemporary teachers might be said to be working in what Žižek (2011) refers to as the ‘end-times’, evident in eschatological and utopian notions such as the end of history, the end of ideology, or the triumph of liberal capitalism (e.g. Fukuyama, 1992), as well as in apocalyptic and dystopian predictions of impending economic decline and social decay (Boucher, 2006). A characteristic discourse in these end-times in the field of education is that of ‘educationomics’ (Stronach, 2010, p. 176), or “education and economics, part and whole, a creature of moral panics and policy hysterias, full of false comparisons and non sequiturs yet one which is considerably more powerful than any other current educational discourse” (Stronach, 2010, p. 23). Indeed, educationomics seems an apt descriptor of the contemporary hegemony of dominant global discourses of neoliberalism in education (Rancière, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Sharpe & Boucher, 2010), characterized by logics of competition, instrumentalism, and atomization (Clarke, 2012).

This global hegemony, involving “a troubling reversal of roles, [in which] those who champion the neoliberal agenda are currently the reformers” (Rancière, 2010, p. 21), is typically justified through reference to a narrative – we might say, a fantasy – whereby the nation-state faces unprecedented competition in the globalized marketplace of the twenty-first century, demanding more sophisticated skills on the part of workers and requiring schools to equip students with the requisite skills for the knowledge economy. This narrative, and the triumphant market-oriented political order it reflects, places teachers in the frontline of national economic defense and in the center of educational reform, thus justifying the detailed mapping and scrutiny of their work that has increasingly characterized a range of contexts (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009; Larsen, 2010). Such narratives of teacher ‘responsibilisation’ (Shamir, 2008), underpinned by neoliberalism’s deep-seated distrust of professionalism in general and of teachers in particular (Connell, 2009, p. 217), underlie and justify government intervention into teaching in the form of teacher professional standards (Ryan & Bourke, 2012).

The notion of responsibilisation in relation to professionals may be seen as *ironic*, in that it implies an oxymoronic agentification akin to the contradictory notion of bringing freedom and democracy to ‘rogue’ countries by armed conquest. This tension between empowerment and subordination is reflected in the dilemma between ‘inside out’ and ‘outside in’ professionalism (Dawson, 1994) – a tension in which power relations are evident in the disproportionate influence of policy on practice in comparison to that of practice on policy (Coffield, Edward, Finlay, Hodgson, Spours, Steer, & Gregson, 2007). Indeed, it is helpful to view the makeup of the ‘professional’ in neoliberal times as a paradoxical mix, “a construct born of methodological reduction, rhetorical inflation and universalist excess” (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002, p. 110), in which the micro prescriptiveness imposed on practice is the price of macro responsibilities for the future of society, justifying and requiring the reduction of multiplicity within and between individuals to a ‘false singularity’ (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002, p. 117). One of our aims in this paper is to explore an ethics of singularity in relation to professionalism that refuses the reduction of difference to ‘sameness’ both within and between individuals.

As part of this responsibilisation agenda, and in common with many other countries, Australia has recently adopted a set of national professional teacher standards – superseding various earlier state-based versions – that seek to enumerate and list the work of teachers and hence to define effective teaching and teacher quality. To quote from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* website[[1]](#footnote-1):

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers is a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students. The Standards do this by providing a framework which makes clear the knowledge, practice and professional engagement required across teachers’ careers. They present a common understanding and language for discourse between teachers, teacher educators, teacher organisations, professional associations and the public.

Such standards, couched within the terms of their own fantasy in which teaching and learning can be homogenized via a ‘common understanding’ and ‘clarified’ within a ‘framework’ – all for the alleged benefit of teachers and students – undoubtedly have a number of potential advantages, regardless of our allegiance or otherwise to that fantasy. These include: providing increased transparency for pre-service teacher candidates, making the criteria against which they will be evaluated explicit; providing explicit, synoptic articulations of professional practices that might otherwise remain intuitive and implicit (the ‘cottage industry’ criticism of teaching), and dispersed across different spatio-temporal settings; providing a shared language for teachers and other education professionals in which to discuss teaching practice (see also Moore, 2004, p. 81); and, potentially, providing “a public definition of professionalism that displays the complex work that teachers do and the difficulty of doing it well” (Connell, 2009, p. 220). In these ways they can be seen to make teaching and its evaluation more transparent, predictable and efficient.

The AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers in Australia comprise seven “interconnected, interdependent and overlapping” standards: *1. Know students and how they learn; 2. Know the content and how to teach it; 3. Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning; 4. Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments; 5. Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning; 6. Engage in professional learning and; 7. Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community*. These are grouped into three ‘domains of teaching’: *professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement*. Within the framework, the AITSL standards outline what teachers should know and be able to do – and provide evidence of knowing and doing – at various stages of projected career paths, from gaining qualified teacher status to becoming a senior leader: from *Graduate*, *Proficient*, *Highly Accomplished* to *Lead*. The benefits accruing to Australian education from the adoption of the standards are significant: “The development of Standards for the teaching profession is an integral part of ensuring quality learning and teaching in Australian schools. With their development and implementation, Australian education systems are well placed to be among the best in the world”.

As has been argued elsewhere, however, in relation to the standards approach to initial and continuing teacher education in England (see, e.g., Moore 2004), there is a danger that professional teacher standards’ requirements, such as “know the content and how to teach it”, are rendered so vague by the fundamental impossibility of taking account of the idiosyncratic and the contingent in teaching and learning as to result in their being reduced to mere statements of the obvious - rendering judgments regarding the extent to which they have been achieved overly subjective despite the requirement to ‘demonstrate’ and ‘provide evidence’. Like other uncritically presented, ‘universalised’ terms and requirements in the AITSL documentation, such as ‘understand how students learn’ or ‘meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities’, such demands appear as ‘a signifier without a signified’ (Fink, 2004, p. 84) reflecting the nature of the signifier as “the symbol of but an absence” (Lacan, 2002, p.17) – their inherent ‘impossibility’ often disguised by the use of the definite article (‘*the* learning process’, *‘the* social context’). As was asked, by way of example in relation to the early teacher standards in England: “In whose symbolic order is [a term like] ‘ability’ given form?” (Atkinson & Moore, 1994, p. 7).

The printed language of ‘standards’, however, at the same time as denying contingent, idiosyncratic, ‘non-universal’ (and perhaps hard to rationalize) aspects of teaching learning (which might embrace, for example, the emotional contexts and aspects of teaching and learning and their impact on classroom practice and experience) also appears to reject disagreement or discussion - having something of the character of Lacan’s ‘dead letter’ of the law of the symbolic order, whereby a form of language appears to refer to some ‘natural reality’ rather than (as is the case) of a particular *picturing* of reality (Lacan, 2002, p.17). In this sense, the AITSL professional standards include the risk of the reduction of teaching to disconnected dot points that background the intellectual underpinnings of teachers’ work, that underplay its profoundly emotional and social dimensions (including its shaping by wider social, economic and political contexts), and that privilege compliance over critique in the interests of reducing teaching to individually auditable competencies (Connell, 2009).

In offering a critical analysis of the move towards teacher professional standards such as those adopted by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), our focus is not so much on the *details* of the AITSL standards, however, as on the *standards discourse* within which they are embedded. Following Taubman (2009), and to pursue the metaphor of the ‘dead letter’, the paper argues that these discourses and their associated practices have had a reductive and narrowing effect on how teaching and learning – and teaching *about* teaching and learning – are conceptualized, replacing potentially rich understandings of the nature of teachers’ work and careers with a ‘teaching by numbers’ perspective. In particular, we argue that neoliberal education policy’s fetishisation of standards, measurement, transparency, and accountability has worked to eviscerate the ethical and political core of teaching, reducing it instead to what at times seems little more than an exercise in technical competence and instrumental efficiency. As a consequence, professional standards as currently conceived are more likely to be “a framework for codifying not levels of development but degrees of compliance”, as the Cambridge Primary Review put it in the context of England’s most recent set of teacher professional standards (Alexander, 2009, p. 415). As noted by Dunn (above), standards do not just describe practice; they tend to *standardize* *people* in reductive and limiting ways, particularly when conceived as part of a wider panoply of accountability measures.

In Heideggerian terms we might think about teacher professional standards as the ever-increasing delineation and prescription of teachers’ practice at the ‘ontical’ level, which “elides completely any difficult questions concerning what it means *to be* a teacher” i.e. occludes deeper questions at the ontological level (Flint & Peim, 2012, p. 182, emphasis in original). In other words, what is naturalized, and hence to some degree invisible, is a wider enframing of teacher education within instrumental, individualizing and competitive means-end logics, underpinned and enforced by the principle of ongoing assessment in the name of continuous quality improvement (Flint & Peim, 2012; Clarke, 2012). In Levinasian terms, we might argue that, in their ambition to ‘define the work of teachers’, professional standards are an instance of ‘totality’, reducing people to the ‘Same’, as opposed to ‘infinity’ – “the inexhaustible, irreducible singularity of people…[that]…gives meaning to the utter uniqueness of individuals” (Rossiter, 2011, p. 983). To draw another analogy, we might say that the inadequacy of professional standards in relation to the rich complexities – and possibilities – of teaching as experienced, practised and understood by teachers, is akin to the inadequacies of two-dimensional Euclidian geometry, with its rigid distinctions between inside and outside and its fixed spatial coordinates, for conveying the complex multidimensional relationship of the human subject to its spatiotemporal environment, as opposed to topological models that are able to represent the apparent paradoxes of change within constant relations of continuity, contiguity and delimitation without recourse to hierarchies or dichotomies (Evans, 1996, pp. 207-208; Shepherdson, 2008, p. 4). Fink characterizes this kind of topology as an example of “the Lacanian twist… the ability to see something beyond the symbolic” (Fink, 1995), and indeed our overall argument in this paper is that teacher professional standards represent an inevitably inadequate attempt at symbolically capturing and rendering the multidimensionality of teaching - that in order to do justice to teachers’ work, we need to see *beyond* the symbolic. In the following section we elaborate on the idea of the standards as symbolic colonization, and explore the notion of interanimation among the registers of the psyche as part of a ‘Lacanian twist’ on professional teacher standards.

**Seeing through teacher professional standards: A Lacanian twist**

In responding to the challenges this reductiveness poses, the paper draws on Lacan’s three registers of the psyche – the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real[[2]](#footnote-2) (Lacan, 2002) – in order to critique, and attempt to think beyond, neoliberalism’s symbolic framing of teaching in the form of teacher professional standards and the consequent exclusion of the imaginary and the Real. In this reading, the symbolic register – the realm of difference, since symbolic meaning is always differential, but also of regulation, prohibition and exclusion – is embodied in professional standards that enumerate, list, and inventorialise the skills and competencies deemed to comprise ‘effective’ teaching, as part of a wider set of “processes of ‘accountingization’ [which] purport to repeat a copy of ‘good teaching’…that is remembered as a relic of the past” (Thompson & Cook, 2012, p. 12). As suggested by the word ‘relic’, we are dealing here with the living and the dead, with processes of mortification and animation- the comprehensive mapping attempted by teacher professional standards viewed as another form of the ‘dead letter’ of the symbolic order in which concepts have become “deadened by routine use” (Lacan, 2002, p. 199).

Specifically, we argue that the hegemonic status of these standards is having the unfortunate effect of squeezing out any significant space for either the imaginary – the realm of identification, tinged with connotations of alienation, illusion, lure and deception, but also the source of sympathy and of previously unimagined possibilities – or the Real: i.e. that which “resists being symbolized, a kind of surplus or leftover which remains when reality has been thoroughly formalized” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 144). Such a squeezing out has destructive potential to the extent that teachers are “reduced to robotic cogs in the symbolic machine” (Ruti, 2012, p. 232, n.8) - for “whenever the symbolic gains too much power at the expense of the Real, our existence loses its passion and forward-moving cadence” (Ruti, 2012, p. 160). Addressing this issue requires more, however, than merely inverting the hierarchy, since immersion in the Real without the tempering of the symbolic is equally problematic, running the risk of psychosis. To continue with Ruti: “when the symbolic fails to adequately mediate the disorderly energies of the real…we fail to gain a steady foothold in cultural narratives and other collective landmarks that would be able to anchor us in the symbolic world” (Ruti, 2012, pp. 160-161). The paper therefore argues for recognition of ongoing tension and interanimation between the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real in teaching, recognizing that, as Featherstone (2005) points out, the Real inhabits Apollonian *and* Dionysian spheres, with redemptive as well as destructive potential.

Such inter-animation is not about producing a richer and more harmonious state of affairs with regard to teachers’ knowledge and identities, but about the productive possibilities of tension, conflict and uncertainty that lie at the core of both psychoanalysis and politics. As Hoggett argues regarding differences of opinion in relation to public policy, some such differences – and antagonisms – are inevitable, and in democratic societies we should embrace the dialogue, the argument and the psychic energy they both reflect and produce, learning to “enjoy our conflicts” (2004, p. 84) rather than seeking to do away with them.

In similar fashion, our paper argues that the tension between the three Lacanian registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real provides considerable “energy for further development” in relation to the work of teachers and teaching. As Zupančič argues in relation to the paradoxical impossibility of the Real, openness to such tensions also assists us in maintaining space for the challenges of *ethics* and *politic*s, not least when we are ‘thrown out of joint’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 235) by an experience that the symbolic world seems unable or ‘unwilling’ to explain or contain. Rather than allow ourselves to be defeated in and by such situations, we might instead strive to “act in conformity to what threw me ‘out of joint’” (ibid.). Such fidelity to the Real echoes Schön’s advice whereby:

The practitioner allows himself [sic] to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation” (Schön 1983, p. 68).

Thus, the impossibility of the Real does not prevent it from having an effect in the realm of the possible. Zupančič’s challenge of being open to encounters with the Real finds its echo in Eagleton’s reminder that “we need to be alert, ethically speaking, to the losses and gains of each of the Lacanian registers” (2008, p. 322). Our concern in relation to the hyper-rational, symbolic mapping represented by policy documents such as teacher professional standards is that they are one-dimensional insofar as they present as harmonious and complete what is always complex, contradictory, and incomplete. Our hope is that alertness to each of Lacan’s registers will assist us in the ethical and political challenges of thinking at a more micro level – whilst also making links to macro policy levels – as to how teachers as ‘policy workers’ can reclaim professional agency in the face of discourses that position them as merely implementing and reacting to policy developments issuing from elsewhere.

In this vein, the AITSL teacher professional standards’ claim to “define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students” can be read as an ironically de-professionalising move. Within this reductive vision, teaching is characterized as amenable to definition through a list of auditable competencies – which is, in effect, what the elaboration of the seven AITSL teacher professional standards comprise – while elements of ‘high quality, effective teaching’ are also identified, that ‘will improve educational outcomes for students’ (note the categorical modality). The whole neat package is, furthermore, inserted within another equally neat package universalizing teacher progression in a rationalized, incremental, almost Piagetian model of professional development, with teachers moving through various stages of projected career paths - labeled, in yet more ‘empty signifiers’, ‘Graduate’, ’Proficient’, ’Highly Accomplished’ and ‘Lead’ – from gaining qualified teacher status to becoming a senior leader. The implication here seems to be that one cannot be highly accomplished without first being ‘proficient’ (whatever this might mean), and that progression through the ranks is fundamentally a matter of measurable progression through the indicators rather than (for example) the number of years’ experience in the job.

Teachers’ agency is thus occluded, while socially complex and politically thorny issues of equity, privilege and access are conveniently bracketed out so as to present a seductively simple input-output view of the relationship between teaching and learning and a simple, unproblematized view of teacher development. The standards can thus be seen as a reflection of contemporary risk management strategies, insofar as they offer a fantasmatic source of reassurance and certainty in the face of an unruly and chaotic world; that is, they offer a vision of social reality as harmonious and complete, shorn of its constitutive gaps, inconsistencies, contradictions and disjunctions. Such risk management strategies serve to legitimate, and are at the same time legitimated by, other regulative measures in education, such as standardized curriculum and assessment. Individually and in concert these risk management strategies serve to authorize further, additional regulations and reforms when the original measure inevitably fall short of their aims. As Power observes:

[Standards] are ‘unreal’ fictions which are part of giving an immaculate account of how real practice can be. Through these fictions a reform process has reality and legitimacy in the present, whereas the substance of real change is always disappointing and efforts to regulate seem always to be doomed. Strategic ideas with abstracted content provide the necessary conditions of reform discourses in the face of ‘permanently failing’ organizations (Power, 2007, p. 184).

In this way, professional standards echo the fantasmatic logics of education policy more generally, providing an example of policy strategies that seek to simultaneously deny and contain the constitutive disruptions, dislocations and divisions in social life by projecting a vision of social harmony, inclusion and completeness (Clarke, 2012). Such fantasmatic policy visions typically involve beatific and horrific elements. On the one hand, teachers are held up as knowing professionals, key to wider aspirations in relation to social cohesion and economic success; yet, on the other hand, those same teachers are quickly blamed and held to account when a scapegoat for the inevitable shortfalls in relation to social and economic aspirations is required. As Taubman puts it, a “particular ideological formation, such as…standards…holds us by offering at the level of fantasy a particular irrational enjoyment…fantasies of grandiosity and self-abasement, fantasies of knowing…fantasies of control” (2009, p. 148). In these ways, teachers are held to account for the (non)realisation of fantasmatic visions of social harmony and economic fulfillment in an unruly and unpredictable world.

The inadequacies and dangers of symbolic mapping in relation to the work of teaching are highlighted by Atkinson (2004) in a discussion of teacher identity formation in initial teacher education. As he notes in relation to the iteration of teacher professional standards prevailing at the time, “although the Standards framework provides a list of requirements, which all intending teachers must satisfy, it is also evident to most people who have knowledge and experience of teaching, that teaching involves much more than that which is specified in the Standards discourse” (2004, p. 380; see also Moore, 1996; Moore & Atkinson, 1998 for a fuller discussion and a critique of England’s 'competencies' approach that preceded and gave birth to today's 'standards'). Atkinson’s examples of student teachers’ fantasmatic rationalizations in relation to problems they are experiencing during teaching practicums provide powerful illustrations of the potential for scapegoating and pathologisation of students and colleagues when we fail “to acknowledge the lack in the Other, the symbolic order, through which understanding is achieved, and the persistence of the Real” (2004, p. 393). As Atkinson points out, teacher identity formation is shaped by the Real which lies beyond – and inevitably disrupts – discursive construction, but which must also be repressed/pathologised in order to remain faithful to the dominant rational symbolic narrative of competence and effectiveness that teacher professional standards embody.

To return to Lacan’s three registers of the psyche and the notion of the ‘dead letter’, we might say that the discourse of teacher professional standards remains locked within a hegemonic and reproductive version of the symbolic, where creativity and critique are reduced to a matter of selection from among established practices and received traditions. As Fink (1995, p. 101) notes, “the law inevitably exceeds its authority: the symbolic order kills the living being or organism in us, rewriting it or overwriting it with signifiers such that being dies (‘the letter kills’) and only the signifier lives on”. As a result of this official rewriting/overwriting of teachers’ professional identity, coupled with the pressures towards compliance, the resources to subvert and refashion dominant meanings may not be easily to hand and teachers may, as Ball, Maguire and Braun found in the context of their research into policy enactments in schools, be reduced to various forms of “discontents, murmurings, indifference and disengagements” (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012, p. 150). Thus what we are seeing, in the context of teachers’ positioning in relation to the “hegemonic ‘hypernarrative’” (Stronach, 2010, p. 10) of global neoliberal education policies of standards and accountability, is not only a squeezing out of the imaginary and the Real, but a squeezing out of spaces for c*ritical symbolic agency.* This is leading teachers to, in effect, commit ‘epistemic suicide’ (Webb, 2012) or find solace in practices described by Moore (2012) as ‘virtuous pragmatism’, wherein practitioners retreat from active confrontation with other policy ‘actors’ (Ball et al., 2012), reconfiguring their capitulation in the more acceptable terminology of compromise. Such compromises themselves offer means by which to manage the anxiety caused by the impossibility of reconciling their own teaching imaginary with the regulated, reductive vision of teaching offered in hegemonic policy ensembles– which leads us to consideration of what possibilities might be identified for moving beyond standardization by the standards.

**Envisioning alternatives: Sublimation, ethics and education**

Our aim in this section is to use the thinking tools of Lacan’s registers of the psyche, along with Lacanian notions of sublimation, to think beyond the risks accompanying the regulation of teachers and teaching by teacher professional standards. In particular, we wish to consider how we might conceptualize the (re)animation of teaching, envisaged in terms of a revitalization of possibilities for criticality and creativity, in the face of the narrowing, reductive and conservative consequences of the symbolic colonization represented by the teacher professional standards that results in teachers adopting attitudes of resignation, compliance or cynicism.

One potential response, as noted above, is to exploit the inability of the symbolic to achieve full and final closure and to therefore seek to subvert the signifier from within. Yet, as also noted above, this requires a substantive degree of agency that may be in short supply. As Ruti observes: “when the subject is surrounded by signifiers that carry the hegemonic messages of the tyrant, and that do not consequently grant it any opportunity for affirmative self-constitution, the signifier itself can become an enemy of insurmountable proportions” (Ruti, 2012, p. 78). The danger is that the hegemonic power of the signifier ‘standards’, with its implicit compulsion to approval (since standards must, by their very definition, be good), is such that opposition comes to be seen not only as futile but as somehow heretical (who but those who would embrace mediocrity could possibly object to ‘the standards’?). Thus, even when opposition does exist it is likely to be cast within the terms and vocabulary *of* ‘standards’, rather than by way promoting any radical alternative to them.

Another response is to engage in the Žižekian ‘Act’, involving a categorical break with the normative regimes of the symbolic – through strategies such as symbolic divestiture, heroic violence or ethical self-sacrifice whereby “one bears witness to one’s fidelity to the Thing by *sacrificing (also) the Thing itself* (Žižek, 2000, p. 154, empasis in original; see also Žižek, 2008; 2009) – in order to capitalize on the constructive potentialities of destruction inhering in the Real. For teachers this might involve wholesale refusal to recognize or engage with the ‘standards’. However, such rejection of the symbolic merely inverts the dominance of the symbolic over the real, investing the latter with unwarranted characteristics. For within the Real “there is no difference, no otherness, no opposition, and therefore no possibility of either politics or ethics in the usual sense of these terms. As a consequence, the valorization of the real as a site of political and ethical ‘purity’ all too easily turns into a post-political and post-ethical pipedream” (Ruti, 2012, p. 123).

An alternative approach would be to seek to forge a relationship of productive tension between the symbolic and the Real. Our starting point in sketching this approach is to draw a distinction between the Real and reality. The latter is the context, the external social world, within which we conduct our everyday lives, and it is essentially constructed through the symbolic order (language, customs, etiquettes and so forth). It is this socially constructed reality that is the referent and source of authority in numerous education and other policy documents, justifying reform in the name (for example) of the ‘realities’ of global competition - an ideological attitude of fatalism that we might refer to as ‘necessitarianism’ (Munck, 2003). By contrast, the Real, which characterizes “the human being as simply a being of needs” (Van Haute, 2002, p. 22), and which resists incorporation into the symbolic, “does not wait, especially not for the subject, since it expects nothing from speech. But it is there… ready to submerge with its roar what the ‘reality principle’ constructs there that goes by the name of the ‘outside world’” (Lacan, 2002, p. 324).

Such a perspective does not view the Real as the ethical alternative to the hegemonic symbolic but as something that causes “the tear in the fabric of the symbolic…through which the sublime enters the domain of everyday life” (Ruti, 2012, p. 26). The notion of the sublime and the process of sublimation are conceived here not in Freudian terms of rechanneling pathologised sexual drives towards higher purposes, but rather the infusing of everyday objects with desire in a way that “allows one to counteract the devaluation of projected objects in the everyday world… [to revalue] such ordinary objects by discovering their immanent sublimity” (Hurst, 2008, p. 342). As Hurst goes on to note, there are links to be made between Lacanian notions of sublimation and Derrida’s concept of iterability: “‘Iterability’ is Derrida’s name for this paradoxical logic of excess, whereby I repeat the object as just what it is but always with the inestimable difference made by the ‘supplement’ of my love/interest” (Hurst, 2008, p. 342). In a non-foundational and non-necessitarian world, sublimation provides an avenue for overcoming the fatalism of ‘there is no alternative’ and of lapsing into despair, cynicism or refusal, simultaneously opening up spaces for ethical thinking beyond instrumental concerns by helping us become more attuned to otherness and providing a way of simultaneously resisting and transcending the reality principle, which insists that the status quo be accepted as that beyond which there is no alternative. In Zupančič’s words:

One could say that sublimation opposes itself to reality, or turns away from it, precisely in the name of the Real. To raise an object to the dignity of the Thing is not to idealize it, but, rather, to ‘realize’ it, that is, to make it function as a stand-in for the Real… [S]ublimation gives value to what the reality principle does not value (2003, p. 77 & 78).

Central to this perspective is recognizing the role of desire and its potentially ambivalent consequences as something that “both resists the symbolic/ideological order and simultaneously urges obedience to it” (Moore, 2006, p. 497). Such recognition is not a matter of pursuing desire come what may in Wagnerian fashion to its final apocalyptic consequences; nor is it a matter of ceding on desire in the name of pragmatic conformity to the normalizing effects of what Lacan (1992) refers to as “the service of goods” (for example, following the professional standards in compliant fashion); nor is it a matter of adaptation to the reality principle (Van Haute, 2002). Rather, it is about “keeping desire alive by refusing to close the gap between the Thing and things”, and ensuring “that there is room in human life for the ‘undead’ (or transcendent) energies” of the Real (Ruti, 2012, p. 148 & 153).

The sublime thus exists in contrast to the Standards, which purport to identify, in the interests of clarity, efficiency, and productivity, what constitutes effective teaching and what is required of teachers at various stages of their careers. Standards are statements thereof that effectively deny the existence of surplus, excess, the Real, affect and desire – simultaneously closing off possibilities for other imaginings and envisionings in relation to teaching and the work of teachers. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than in the “Practice” section of the AITSL Standards under the heading “Manage challenging behavior” (Standard 4.3) and the requirement at Graduate level to “demonstrate knowledge of practical approaches to manage challenging behavior” - illustrative not only of a failure to account for the “messy complexity” of classroom life and experience (Goodson and Walker 1991) for both teachers and students, but an effective denial of the nature, role and impact of affect in teaching and learning. Emotionality here becomes reduced to its (negative) effects in order that it can be rationalized by the symbolic order within a dominant discourse of sameness and ‘normalcy’. The troubling effects of emotional difficulties are not so much to be understood as to be ‘dealt with’ in line with an appeal to the ubiquitous business-speak ‘virtue’ of management.

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that such discourse is, so to speak, ‘created’ by and within the Standards documentation. The discourse concerning behavior and its associated terminology has had wide currency among educators and policy makers for as long as formal compulsory education has existed, with an independent developmental history that has included (for example) the superficial linguistic ‘softening’ of the apparently more judgmental ‘punishment’ of ‘mis-behaviour’ of the past. The Standards, however, ‘fix’ the discourse, legitimizing it and confirming its boundaries in the printed word of officialdom. What is required, then, is an opposition to the Standards *discourse*, which in the guise of comprehensive symbolic sufficiency presents itself as definitive of teaching and is thus in danger of colonizing the Real and the imaginary – a discourse which seeks to reduce teaching to an itemization process, a disaggregation or fragmentation of pedagogy which is then, so to speak, rather awkwardly put back together again so that it resembles what it started out as but can never really be quite the same. This opposition requires *recognition* of the sublime and its capacity to enliven and challenge the symbolic order. Given the inherent unruliness of the Real, this is not something (unlike the Standards) that can be presented in neat-and-tidy prescriptive format. But possible lines can be envisaged, such as challenging hegemonic, managerial versions of terms like ‘accountability’, and arguing, for instance, for local versions of being accountable to the voices of students and communities (not their *assumed* voices as projected by neoliberal policymakers) rather than to the perceived need to promote and meet the ‘demands’ of a globally competitive economy (Smyth, 2012).

What is thus required is the interrogation of the Standards discourse by and within alternative discourses that acknowledge the idiosyncratic and contingent but nonetheless inevitable disruptions and dislocations in teaching; discourses that emphasize the importance of critical and creative reflection and their potential to complexify and transcend the status quo; and discourses that recognize the critical influence of contexts, including historical, socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts, in shaping teaching, learning and education. In other words, rather than seeing teachers’ identities as defined in equivalence to a list of pre-determined predicates, we need to be mindful of the gap between such definitions and the singularity of individual teachers arising from excess or surplus in relation to standard-ised competencies and definitions.

**Conclusion: Towards an ethics of singularity**

In relation to the hegemonic power and dominance of the symbolicOther, as represented by regulatory mechanisms such as the AITSL teacher professional standards, the Lacanian insights we have been exploring above into the subversive and sublimatory potential of the signifier and its capacity, when animated by the energies of the Real, to endow ordinary events and everyday objects with *extra*ordinary vitality, provide ways of moving beyond the potentially deadening hand of standards and recapturing possibilities for ‘enchantment’ (Bennett, 2001) in contemporary teaching. Such a move is ethical, insofar as the refusal to limit our understanding of teachers’ identities and our notions of good teaching to the ‘what’ of itemized professional standards, and instead to acknowledge the singular ‘who’ of teachers, arising from the surplus that exceeds symbolic mapping, is in itself an act of resistance to reduction and control in favour of contingency and openness.

Sublimation and the inter-animation of the Real and symbolic registers thus suggest novel possibilities for thinking about teachers and teaching. In particular, they suggest how we might conceptualize a refusal to limit ‘good teaching’ to the discourses of professional standards and accountability; how we might think beyond current concerns with instrumentalism, pragmatism and utility; and how teachers as policy workers might be encouraged to move beyond the deadening effects of standards discourses and standardization practices by legitimizing desire and passion as openings to the sublime and the singular in teaching. This invites us to recognize education as a process that creates social reality rather than merely being a process regulated by and subservient to an ideologically pre-ordained version of reality – that is, to envisage and aspire to an exceptional rather than a merely ‘standard’ education for teachers, students and schools.

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1. This and subsequent references to the AITSL Australian professional standards for teachers are from the AITSL website: http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Overview/Purpose [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We are following the practice of Žižek and others in capitalizing the Real to emphasis its distinctness from ‘reality’, unless we are quoting from authors such as Ruti who do not follow this practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)