

HOW TO MOVE BEYOND THE TRUST–CONTROL DILEMMA? WHAT INSIGHT INTO THE WORK OF EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS MIGHT HAVE TO OFFER

CARLIJNE CEULEMANS

Abstract

Debates on educational standards often take the form of an either–or discussion. Either they are seen as an instrument that enhances educational quality and transparency, or they are criticized for such adverse effects as deprofessionalization, fragmentation, and reductionism. In this article, we try to move beyond this dilemma by shifting the focus away from what standards are (their content) or what they are for (their goal or intentions) and toward a detailed study of what standards do in particular settings. Building on a case study of the Flemish teacher career profile “in action” (Ceulemans, 2015; Latour, 1987), we present six mechanisms for standardizing work. First, for standards to have an effect, they need a specific type of user (as otherwise they are just a piece of paper no one cares about). Second, the more a standard allows for versatile use, the more powerful its effect will be. Third, once people identify with a standard in what they say and do, its effect tends to go unnoticed, which, fourth, often implies a shift in control between the standard and its user(s). Fifth, the capacity to control lies within (those working with) the standard, not in the hands of those behind the standard. Sixth, building on the fifth, what a standard does depends on what and who it relates to. If we want to grasp educational standards and what they do in education, therefore, we have to know more about how exactly they come to work. Opening the black box of educational standards, we argue, makes it possible to repeatedly discuss which role(s) standards (are to) play in education, whether these standards do what those working with them—teachers, school principals, teacher educators, educational researchers, experts, and policymakers—expect them to do, and, if not, how their working conditions need to be altered.

Keywords

standardization in-the-making, teacher profiles, actor–network theory, blackboxing

Introduction

Debates on such educational standards as performance measures, professional profiles, and competency lists for teaching staff often take the form of an either–or discussion (e.g., Fendler, 2009; Ladwig & Gore, 2009; Page, 2016; Sachs, 2001; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Storey, 2007). Either they are seen as an instrument to ensure “that competent people want to work as teachers, that their teaching is of high quality, and that all students have access to high quality teaching” (OECD, 2005, pp. 1–2), or they are regarded as an intrusive expression of the ambition to regulate and control teaching and education in general (e.g., Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Ball, 2003). Whereas the first perspective assumes a linear relationship between raising standards and improving quality as well as the standing and status of the teaching profession (Aelterman, 1999; European Commission, 2013; OECD, 2005; see also Hargreaves, 2000), the second criticizes the idea of capturing the complex and always undefined practices of teaching in performance measures, lists of competencies, or learning outcomes, pointing to such side effects as deprofessionalization, fragmentation, and reductionism (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2007, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Korthagen, 2004; Larsen, 2010; Sachs, 2003; Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008).

As Stone-Johnson has argued, these often extreme responses to educational standards can be broadly reduced to two opposing views regarding the trust–control dilemma:

The teacher disempowerment perspective views schools as too tightly controlled and bureaucratic. The solution to tight control is to decentralize schools and increase the autonomy and professionalism of teachers. In contrast, the school disorganization perspective views schools as too disorganized and as lacking control over teachers’ work. The solution is tightened centralized control and increased teacher accountability. (2014, p. 76)

Conceiving standards through a binary lens, however, fails to capture the specific and unintended consequences of different sorts of standards for different groups of actors in distinct social settings (Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012; Fendler, 2009; Page, 2016; Sachs, 2003; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Storey, 2007; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). While such notions as “parallel professionalism” (Stone-Johnson, 2014) and “new professionalism” (Storey, 2007) have been introduced to point to the different ways in which educational standards are experienced by teachers from different generations, various authors have highlighted the importance of research perspectives that enable a view of the tensions and contradictions that are enacted when standards and their concomitant accountability measures come to play a role in what people say and do in education (e.g., Campozano Aviles & Simons, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2007; Ladwig & Gore, 2009; Page, 2016; Penninckx,

Vanhoof, De Maeyer, & Van Petegem, 2016; Sachs, 2001; Simons, Kelchtermans, Leysen, & Vandenbroek, 2016). In this article, we therefore take an interest in how exactly standards come to work: that is, what is needed for a particular standard to have any effect on educational practices. Building on Latour (1987), we treat standards as “black boxes,” suggesting that what a standard is, how it works, and what it makes us—those working with the standard—do cannot be answered in general. Rather, a “fully localized approach” (Timmermans & Berg, 1997) is necessary, one aimed at careful observation of the ways in which a particular standard materializes (in other words: becomes real) in documents, procedures, activities, and instruments. Unlike an approach to standards as stable, uniform, fixed phenomena whose effects can be known in advance, this focus on practices is intended to imply situations in which a standard, and thus the related mechanisms of its actions (its standardizing work), are in-the-making and always under-determined (e.g., Lampland & Star, 2009; Latour, 1987).

Closely related to this first research question—how does a standard come to work?—is a second one, namely how does it gain authority? While the former focuses on the doings needed for a standard to have any effect, the latter aims to explain how a seemingly passive thing like a professional profile or competency list can become a factual matter that has the capacity to (re)direct human behavior. This “steering effect” of policy instruments has been highlighted recently by various educational researchers (see, e.g., Decuypere, Ceulemans, & Simons, 2014 on digital policy instruments; Simons, 2007, 2015 on European policy instruments; Simons, Kelchtermans, Leysen, & Vandenbroek, 2016 on curricular standards; and Verckens, Simons, & Kelchtermans, 2010 on instruments for information and communication). In many instances, working with educational standards has become the normal or logical way to do things. In fact, educational standards help with designing curricula, provide criteria to evaluate (teacher) education programs and measure learning outcomes, offer guidance for policy decisions, and serve as a self-reflection framework for students, teachers, principals, and teacher educators. It seems irrelevant, even irrational, to question something that we have come to see as part of the way things are. Accordingly, the ways in which these standards interact with what we do and say have become automatic and have disappeared from sight. Opening the black box of educational standards, we argue, makes it possible to repeatedly discuss which role(s) standards (are to) play in education, whether these standards do what we expect them to do, and, if not, whether and how their working conditions need to be altered (as suggested by, e.g., Biesta, 2014; Koster & Dengerink, 2008; Ladwig & Gore, 2009; Sachs, 2001; Simons, Kelchtermans, Leysen, & Vandenbroek, 2016).

In the following section, we relate this approach to a detailed analysis of the teacher career profile (TCP) at work in Flanders, the northern part of

Belgium. The Flemish TCP was established by a Flemish government decree (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2007a). It defines the functions, tasks, and attitudes of an experienced teacher by means of 10 job specifications relating to the different professional roles expected from a teacher by society and the working field. For novice teachers, the TCP was divided into three different, though similar, lists of core or basic competencies: one for teachers at nursery schools, one for teachers in primary education, and one for teachers in secondary education (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2007b). These lists of basic competencies, which define what knowledge, skills, and attitudes graduates have to master in order to qualify to begin teaching, function as attainment targets for teacher education. In this way, the decree aimed to guarantee quality and uniformity in the training and professionalization of teachers, as well as to create the legal basis for a common quality control system in Flemish higher education.¹

Between 2011 and 2013, all specific teacher education programs² in Flanders were required to set up a self-evaluation followed by an external audit, the results of which would be made public in an inspection report. To gain empirical answers to our research question on standardization in-the-making, we carried out field work in three settings. First, we reported on an attempt to map the multiple ways in which the TCP is currently active or at work in the Flemish educational domain in general, and in teacher education more specifically. Next, we followed the role played (or the work done) by the TCP and its associated basic competencies throughout the process of making a self-evaluation report in one specific teacher education program. Finally, we studied the impact of the basic competencies within the inspection report published after visits to and comparisons of all specific teacher education programs in order to create the first ever state-of-the-art overview of the quality of teacher education in Flanders (Flemish University

¹ The reform of the teacher education system has been a central concern of the Flemish government since 1989, resulting in several legal initiatives before the most recent decree on teacher education in 2006. Currently, the Ministry of Education and Training is preparing a new reform of teacher education aimed at incorporating teacher education into the bachelor–master structure.

² Currently, there are two types of teacher education programs in Flanders: (1) integrated programs provided by higher education colleges which result in a Bachelor in Education degree (nursery, primary, secondary education); and (2) specific programs which are provided by universities, higher education colleges, and centers for adult education and which can be taken either during one’s training for an initial degree or after qualification and in combination with a job. The Ministry of Education and Training’s current policy proposal (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016) suggests changing this second type into a master’s degree program to be followed only at universities and arts colleges.

and Higher Education Council, 2012). Before discussing these analyses in more detail, the next section will clarify the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying this research.

In the fourth section, we summarize the mechanisms of standardizing work we traced along the transformation of the TCP into some sort of automaton – a thing that works on its own. This brings us back to the aforementioned questions as to whether insight into the mechanisms of standards-at-work can inform the debate by replacing the central question “Are you for or against standards in education?” with “Do we agree with what this particular standard makes us do?” and “Can we make it work differently?”.

The Flemish teacher profile in action

Over a period of approximately 20 years, both the Flemish TCP and the basic competencies have become a reference point in the Flemish educational landscape. A simple Google search gives a snapshot of the many places where references are currently being made to these competency lists: various pages within the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training website; websites and course information of teacher education institutions; formal communications by such advisory bodies as the Flemish Education Council, the Socio-Economic Council, teacher unions, and school governing boards; newsletters and teacher blogs; Wikipedia and YouTube; informational brochure articles, and books; the Belgian Official Gazette; Power Point presentations; and the Competent database for the Flemish labor market. In short, the Flemish TCP is active in the sense that it is mentioned and discussed in various places, such as the internet.

Building on Latour (1987), the many references to the TPC and basic competencies circulating on the internet can be regarded in two ways. From the first point of view, the fact that reference is being made to the competency lists is seen as proof of their effectiveness. The second perspective turns this logic around and says that the lists can only have an effect if and for as long as they are referred to. In the first perspective, the TCP and basic competencies are used to explain the movement they have brought about. Seen from the latter perspective, it is exactly this movement that causes them to have an effect. In this sense, what makes them relevant, then, comes rather from the outside (through reference being made to the lists in other documents and other locations) than from the lists themselves (the specific competencies, skills, and attitudes they contain). The first perspective is what Latour calls “ready made” or “all made science,” the second “science in action” or “in the making.” The former perspective treats competency profiles as well-defined objects and, as such, makes them into a matter of fact for which the meaning

and effects are known and explained (as in such statements as “teacher standards guarantee educational quality” and, from the other side of the critical spectrum, “teacher standards steer and control teachers, reducing their autonomy”). In contrast, the latter perspective remains ignorant of what the lists are and bring about, approaching them as disputed matters of concern to be examined up close. The critical function of this approach, then, is not to tell those working with the standards what these really do/are—that is, to de-construct reality. Rather, the critical meaning of actor–network theory for Latour is to re-construct the state of affairs by tracing the mechanisms that stabilize or “blackbox” particular explanatory categories, assumptions, hierarchies, and practices (Latour, 2004, 2005; see also Edwards, 2016). Where we usually tend to buy or accept teacher standards through their input—a list of expected competencies, functions, and attitudes—and their (un)desired output—professional, competent, and effective teachers responsible for the improvement of educational quality—the central question in this research is how these standards work and in what way(s) they become blackboxed into a factual given. Starting from the Flemish TCP and its concomitant basic competencies, we sought the people, things, and interactions that make it up—what, in line with Latour, we will call re-opening the black box. In this way, our research intends to add reality to the debate as it offers ways to see what the TCP does and to discuss what we see. As such, the aim is to keep the discussion on the role of standards in education open and ongoing, instead of closing it down by taking a stand for or against.

To approach the TCP in action, we require three central assumptions. First, if we aim to understand the role played (or the work done) by the Flemish TCP and basic competencies, we should not look at what is on these lists (their content, the concepts used), nor at what people think or want them to do (the meaning or agency attributed to them). Instead, we take the references made to the lists as the entry point for mapping the collection of people (policymakers, teacher educators, researchers, experts, student-teachers, unions), things (reports, decrees, teacher training programs, publications), and the relationships among them that enable the TCP and basic competencies to do what they do. This perspective implies a rather unusual interpretation of what it means to be an actor, including both non-human (things, materials) and human elements. As Latour (2005, p. 71) stated, “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor.” The point of interest, then, is what is actually being done by both humans and things in their activities, as well as the intensity of these activities, which makes these actors more or less present. In our study, therefore, it is not only the policymakers, teaching staff, and inspection committees working with the teacher standards that are considered to be actors or agents, but also the TCP and basic competency lists (and the variety of their appearances in textual material) themselves.

Second, if we wish to trace the interactions between the lists and the people working with the lists, and the ways in which these become automatized and disappear from sight, we have to look at practices of standardization in-the-making. Therefore, we conducted field work in three different settings where the Flemish TCP and basic competencies were active at the time of our analysis: we followed teacher educators working with the basic competencies in the context of a self-assessment, we studied the effect that same list of competencies generated through the external inspection of all specific teacher training programs in Flanders, and we traced the Flemish TCP back in time to the point when it could hardly count on any support (and its [net] work was quasi non-existent) to follow its subsequent transformations until the present. By focusing on practices, we mean to say that we seek explanation for whatever occurs within a particular setting not outside of that setting but within the ways of doing and of speaking that occur within the given setting at a certain time and place (Schatzki, 2002).

Third, the notion of tracing should be understood here in its most literal sense: during the analysis we sought empirical (mostly textual) traces of links between the teacher standards as things or materials and the people or humans working with these standards. If, say, a teacher training website referenced the TCP or contained a hyperlink to a PDF of an informational brochure about the basic teacher competencies, we regarded this as an interaction among: 1) the lists, 2) the training institute website, 3) the website authors (e.g., teacher educators), 4) potential website user(s) (e.g., future students), and 5) the brochure (which, in turn, gathers a number of actors such as the authors, publisher, potential readers, scientific and popular publications referred to in the text, and research groups who wrote these publications). It is by means of these traces on websites, in files, in student portfolios, in legal texts, in matrices and tables—what Latour (1987) refers to as “inscriptions”—that the TCP inscribes itself into reality, materializes, and becomes an entity. In addition to gathering inscriptions, we made observations and spoke to key informants that could point to inaccuracies and fill in blind spots in the data collection. For each setting, we made a different map and an adjusted the description, focusing on the techniques and mechanisms we gathered along the way. While we use techniques to refer to collections of similar interactions in practices where the TCP and basic competencies are at work (e.g., juridization, operationalization, representation, comparison), we understand mechanisms to refer to the ways in which these workings become automatized and disappear from sight (e.g., objectifying, monitoring, personalizing). Mechanisms, therefore, always imply a double movement of stabilization and blackboxing. The following two sections will discuss these three analyses in more detail, and then we will summarize the research findings by introducing six mechanisms of standardizing work.

Mapping the (net)work of the Flemish TCP

The more references are made to the lists, and the more diverse angles these references take, the more stable the lists become: the circulating and objectifying mechanisms

When the Flemish TCP as it circulates today is traced back in time, it turns out that the profile is not a singular thing. Rather, the TCP's coming into being displays a collection of lists, from earlier versions of the profile to similar lists traveling under a different name, such as the basic competencies for beginning teachers and the professional development profile of teacher educators. Moreover, these (versions of the) lists systematically gathered more people (e.g., academics, teacher educators, policymakers, experts, union representatives, advisory boards) and things (e.g., scientific publications, reports, advice, decrees, curricula). The more widespread this gathering became, the more the TCP and the basic competencies gained persuasiveness. This is visualized in Figure 1. By *elements* we mean the material actors which are connected to the lists, while *stakeholders* refers to the people that became involved over the course of time.

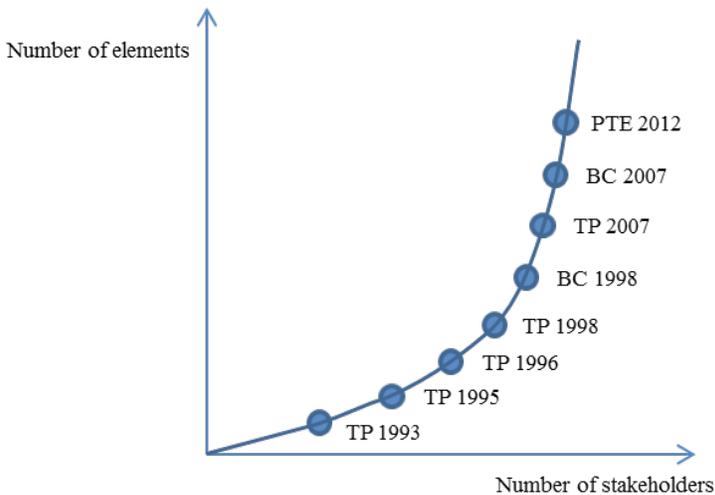


Figure 1. Circulation is accumulation; TP = teacher (career) profile, BC = basic competencies, PTE = professional development profile for teacher educators.

When, for instance, in the middle of the 1990s the TCP became supported not only in academic circles but also in political ones, it gained in importance, giving it more influence on decision-making (e.g., Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1996). A similar accumulation occurred when the TCP and

the basic competencies were set by a decree in 1998 (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1999). The scientific argumentation and political interests advocating the profile's case then became reinforced by a legal framework that turned the competency lists into an obligation in light of quality assurance (e.g., Aelterman, 1999). With the revision of the TCP in 2006 and the connected procedures of internal and external inspection, the basic competencies came to the fore as an instrument for evaluating teacher education programs in Flanders (Flemish Interuniversity Council & Flemish Higher Education Council, 2009; Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2006). This was followed by the publication of two informational brochures, introducing new TCP and basic competency lists in teacher education, schools, centers for continuing education, and pedagogical counseling services (Aelterman, Meysman, Troch, Vanlaer, & Verkens, 2008a, 2008b). By means of examples, testimonials, cases, exercises, and illustrations, these brochures made concrete how teacher educators, school mentors, and student-teachers could get started on the basic competencies. Simultaneously, the formal juridical lists, addressed to no one in particular, are presented as a responsibility shared among teachers, school teams, teacher educators, and the Flemish government in order to fulfill their societal mission, namely to guarantee high quality education for all.

For these reasons, the competency lists began circulating in ever more and ever more diverse places, increasing their legitimacy for ever more users (for a more detailed report, see Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012). We denote this double movement with the mechanisms of circulating and objectifying: the more people start working with the lists, the more they circulate, and the more they circulate, the more they become stabilized as generally accepted objects. It is important to note, however, that the stability of the lists is a derivative of the various types of objectivity they manage to combine. What makes the actual lists so convincing, then, is that they are scientifically based as well as politically supported, legally framed, pedagogically inspired, and operational. It is indeed clearly good to use them because it is what research shows to be proper, it is the result of political consensus, it is required by law, it is a shared responsibility, and, last but not least, it offers guidance for determining whether one is doing well. Consequently, if one wants to question or criticize the TCP or basic competencies or tries to speak about teaching and education in a different way—that is, without making reference to these competency lists—one can expect to face some particularly strong counterarguments. Moreover, the authority of the competency lists cannot be attributed to a single person or group of people behind the lists (e.g., the government). Rather, their strength or authority is generated by the multiple concerns from multiple stakeholders they bring together into a self-contained whole. This also

explains how the TCP and basic competencies manage to impose their terms and conditions on those who make use of the lists, as will be discussed in the next section.

The more people make the lists into something of their own, the more intrusive their effect is: the personalizing and institutionalizing mechanisms

In our second study, we followed the TCP and basic competencies at work in teacher education. More precisely, we focused on one particular list—the basic competencies for teachers in secondary education—and studied the role it has come to play in writing a self-evaluation report to prepare for the external audit of all specific teacher education programs in Flanders. In this empirical case study, the field is one specific teacher training program in Flanders to which we gained access by following the traces (e.g., meeting invitations, reports and attached files, preliminary versions of documents, policy decisions) saved and spread by the reporter of the program's two main policy organs (for a more detailed report, see Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012). In this way, we could register how the list of basic competencies materialized – this time not by means of policy intentions, laws, or informational brochures issued by the government, but by means of an inspection protocol issued by the Flemish Interuniversity Council and Higher Education Council (2009) and its prescribed practices of self-evaluation and inspection.

The personalizing and institutionalizing mechanisms have been introduced to refer to the ways in which the basic teacher competencies become part and parcel of how people see themselves and how they make themselves known to others. If a teacher training program wants to present itself as highly qualitative, its goals, curriculum, course descriptions, and evaluation formats and criteria must be situated within the competencies determined by the relevant decree (Flemish Interuniversity Council & Flemish Higher Education Council, 2009, p. 14). Writing a self-evaluation report thus gathers people around the teacher competencies and engages them in activities through which everybody is involved in designing, developing, testing, and adjusting a joint program. It urges people to shape and write down their programs and curricula, thereby explicitly demanding they position themselves within the basic competencies listed in the profile. A deadline (February 2011), specific guidelines for (the organization of) the content (determined by the protocol), and the prospective of assessment by an external committee were intended to ensure that each teacher training program complete this task. Moreover, developing a self-evaluation report requires that all sections which play an active role in the program be mobilized in specific types of practices: writing texts; reading, commenting on, and rewriting them; ticking boxes and filling in forms; and from time to time discussing and debating. As the tight schedule of the various steps to be taken in the process of making

a self-evaluation report shows, time is short – and it is running, given that when the external inspection commission arrives it must be apparent that what has been written down in the report is indeed (being) done. The more the basic competencies are recognized as a red thread running through the program, the more the list turns into a given that must be referred to. Conversely, the more the basic competencies become part of the way a training program sees itself through the process of self-evaluation, the more binding the commitment becomes of each individual involved in the program (teacher educators, student-teachers, and school mentors alike) to work with—that is, to refer to, talk about, reflect upon—the list of basic competencies.

Translating and transforming the formal list to make it fit into the framework of a particular teacher program does not point to a failure of effectiveness. Rather, it indicates that the list begins to work as a standard. In other words, the factuality of the list results not only from its stability—being a thing which is so fixed and firm it cannot but be taken into account—but equally from its fluidity – it is a thing which can easily be shaped and bent in order to inspect and profile oneself. Saying that the basic competencies are imposed from above is an all too one-sided view of the matter. Teacher educators contribute of their own accord to the compulsory character of the list by accepting it as a point of reference for what they do and say. Indeed, if they want to know how they are performing (in comparison to others) and what to do in order to perform better, the only way to receive this kind of information is via the basic competency list. In other words, only by means of that particular list can information on performance—or feedback—be produced. This role or effect of the basic competencies in functioning as an obligatory point of passage for teacher education is further enhanced when all teacher training programs are put side by side in a public audit report in order to make statements about the quality of teacher education in Flanders.

The more stakeholders pass through the same point of passage, the more obligatory it becomes: the centralizing and monitoring mechanisms

When the final audit report of specific teacher education was presented by the Flemish University and Higher Education Council, it offered a unique overview over 37 specific teacher training programs in Flanders (Flemish University and Higher Education Council, 2012, vol. 1, pp. 59–63). With the basic teacher competencies at hand as key evaluation criteria, an external audit commission visited each teacher training program to judge its quality and then make a comparative analysis by placing all teacher training programs side by side (for a more detailed report, see Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2014). Based on that comparative analysis, the report suggest a shift in the status of the basic teacher competencies: from a result obligation for teacher training graduates as articulated in the inspection protocol (e.g., Flemish

Interuniversity Council & Flemish Higher Education Council, 2009, p. 10) to a steering mechanism for the content and design of teacher education in the audit report (e.g., Flemish University and Higher Education Council, 2012, vol. 1, p. 51). Thus, the list's effect as an obligatory point of passage for all specific teacher education (and, similarly, for all things and people involved in teacher education) became even more binding. Whereas we saw teacher educators aligning with the basic competencies voluntarily in the process of self-evaluation (though motivated by the inspection protocol regulations and an interest in receiving a positive assessment), through the external audit the basic competencies received additional support from an independent commission, comparative judgment, a public report, and a set of good practices (see Flemish University and Higher Education Council, 2012). As such, the basic competency list once again resounds in teacher education institutions and instances of the Flemish educational policy, although this time not in the shape—or role—of evaluation criteria (as had been the case with the inspection protocol) or training profiles and curricula (as had been the case with the self-evaluation report), but in the form of various sorts of feedback. The fact that this feedback is: 1) formulated by referring to a list issued by a decree, 2) produced based on an inspection and auditing process that was set out in a protocol in consultation with those concerned, 3) gathered by an independent commission of experts by means of site visits, and 4) published as a public report makes it a very powerful actor (and the audit a particularly effective technique).

We introduced the centralizing and monitoring mechanisms to denote how, by producing and bringing together information from distinct places into one table published across five pages of a public report, a new whole is put into place that enables new things to be said and done. The comparative overview in the audit report not only offers a detailed picture of (differences in) teacher training quality, it also shows how teacher training institutes can integrate the basic teacher competencies into their way of working in order to meet the expected quality requirements. Teacher educators are advised, for example, to transform the basic competencies into specific teaching and learning activities (Flemish University and Higher Education Council, 2012, vol. 1, p. 41), to distinguish degrees of importance among various basic competencies (p. 113), to add levels of attainment in the extent to which these basic competencies are to be realized by different students (p. 41), in consultation with schools to create opportunities for student-teachers to become proficient in all 10 competency domains (p. 53), and to devote more attention to their own professionalization so that they acquire the specific skills that come with the job (pp. 54–55). Working with the basic competencies in a good or the right way, then, does not mean using them as a checklist to verify that everything is in order with the applicable requirements. Rather, the list requires a reflective and proactive user

who is willing to (be) evaluate(d) him or herself in order to make directed improvements – improvements to achieve the required competencies.³

Working with the lists becomes automatic: how an impotent piece of paper turns into a powerful given that changes what we say and do

The Flemish TCP and basic competencies work. They work in the sense that they offer an instrument which is so handy and ready for use that we are willing to work with it, that is, we are willing to adjust the things we say and do to the terms and conditions of the lists. In so doing, it has become evident in many places that it is proper to connect (speaking about and engaging with) what a good teacher or good education is to (speaking about and engaging with) a list of competencies. This association has become so familiar that it has disappeared from sight that the TCP and basic competencies do more than just provide us with a practical tool or common frame of reference. Through the interplay between mechanisms ensuring their stability (see Figure 2), the lists gain the power or authority to say something about others and adjust their behavior.

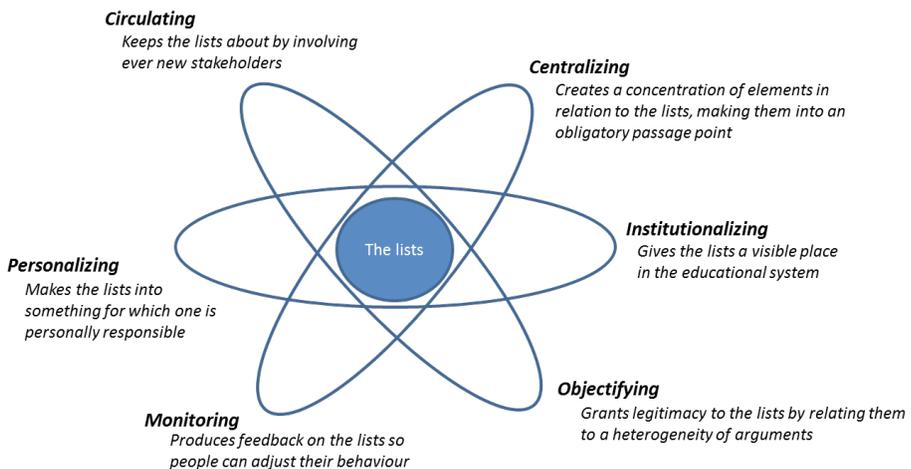


Figure 2. The working mechanisms of the TCP and basic competencies

³ On this steering effect from good practices and feedback, see also Simons (2007, 2015).

In other words, the TCP and basic competencies generate a sort of self-efficacy which cannot be attributed to people misusing or misunderstanding the lists,⁴ nor to the wishes or intentions of those behind the lists (e.g., policymakers or the labor market).⁵ When it is generally accepted that the TCP and basic competencies stand for good teaching and good education, they simultaneously become the only valid way for one to say or show anything about this subject – and, equally, to be heard and seen by others. As a consequence, the deliberation on what makes a teacher good or what makes for good teacher training (between colleagues, with students, with mentors or school principals) is then reduced to a discussion on educational quality by bringing in competency lists that are recognizable and usable by everyone. As such, working with these lists becomes automatic. It is something so obvious that we no longer notice the ways in which it transforms the work we do. This does not mean that there is no room for discussion. Rather, the debate is based on (or framed within) the given lists: how to use them, how to translate them into practice, how to present them in a curriculum, how to make them better known among students and mentors, how to evaluate them, and so on. When the TCP and basic competencies assert their authority, the question of what is good is rendered irrelevant and futile. The answer contained in the standard is so convincing that saying or doing something without referring to it counts for nothing.

Simultaneously, however, our research shows that the self-efficacy of the TCP and its concomitant competency lists is not defined structurally. They only generate an effect by getting people to work with the lists and by ensuring that work continues. This also means that another use of the lists might be possible, and that it is important to ask ourselves what it is we want from them. In Latour's words, what we mean to do with this research is transform the Flemish TCP and basic competencies from a clear and distinct "matter of fact"—a given—into a "matter of concern": a thing that brings people together around a state of affairs precisely because it is disputed and cared about (Latour, 2004). Whereas once facts are generally accepted they tend to go unquestioned as "a (seemingly) certain, cold, unproblematic black

⁴ An oft-cited example of misunderstanding the competency lists is using them as a checklist to see the extent to which one meets the set requirements instead of using them as a means for curriculum development and/or the professionalization of team members (e.g., Flemish University and Higher Education Council, 2012).

⁵ With regard to the Flemish TCP and basic competencies, in addition to suggesting that these lists come from above (from the Ministry, Europe, the OECD), influences from the Netherlands and the labor market are mentioned to explain the popularity of the competency framework in education (e.g., Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008).

box” (Latour, 1987, p. 4), a concern or issue brings ambiguities, uncertainties, and disputes to the fore. By unfolding the (net)work that presents a certain state of affairs as a fact—in this case the Flemish TCP and basic competencies at work in teacher education—one can literally see it in a different way. Professional profiles for teachers and teacher educators, then no longer appear to be necessary or logical matters in the hands of experts, but as cases that can be doubted and disputed and therefore demand our attention.

As such, our research does not provide an answer to the question of what good education or good teaching is about. Nor does it take a position for or against educational standards. What it has to offer is empirical evidence on what happens when such standards come to play a role in what we say and do in education. In so doing, it can bring their (side)effects to the fore, where they can be questioned, collectively debated, and possibly revised.

Conclusion

This article began from the observation that debates on the function and effects of educational standards often take a binary form between those in favor and those against. As a way out of this dichotomy, building on the principles of actor–network theory as deployed by Latour (1987), we introduced an approach to standardization in-the-making. Based on a case study of the Flemish TCP at work, we subsequently described six mechanisms of standardizing work, each of which point to double movement:

1. For standards to have an effect, they need a specific type of user (as otherwise they are just a piece of paper no one cares about), and the more a standard allows for a versatile use, the more stabilized it becomes – as described in terms of the double movement of circulating and objectifying.
2. The more people identify with a standard in what they say and do, the more its effect tends to go unnoticed, often implying a shift in control between the standard and its user(s) – as referred to in the double movement of personalizing and institutionalizing.
3. The capacity to control lies within (those working with) the standard, not in the hands of those behind the standard – as seen in the double movement of centralizing and monitoring.

We can conclusively state that educational standards have the capacity to effectuate both trust and control, as they offer something to hold on to, which implies the facility to monitor the work we do (e.g., in teacher education).⁶

⁶ Monitoring, in fact, implies the facility to supervise a certain field so as to control it.

It is important to note, however, that what makes educational standards work so as to be more trustworthy than controlling does not depend simply on the way people (mis-)understand or (mis-)use them. Rather, it depends on the way these standards relate to implementation methods (e.g., by enacting parliamentary acts or decrees), measuring instruments (e.g., standardized questionnaires, competency matrices, evaluation reports), evaluation procedures (e.g., the quality assurance system discussed in this article), and policy reward and disciplinary systems (e.g., systems for subsidies and accreditation). They exert different activities and effects which render their role more or less stable, indispensable, and compelling. Bringing this interrelation in the (net)work of a particular standard to the fore, we argue, renders its (side)effects visible and disputable again, opening up the possibility to look at and engage with it in a different way. As for the Flemish TCP, questions were recently raised as to who should own the competency list and, correspondingly, hold the position of gatekeeper responsible for access to and recognition of the teaching profession. Would the TCP work differently if it were in the hands of a professional group of teachers (which does not currently exist in Flanders) instead of policymakers? With regard to the basic competencies, it has been suggested to simplify the basic competency lists in order to reduce the unintended effect of using them as a bucket list within which each and every partial skill or competence must be covered and accounted for. For teacher educators, the framework for training and professionalization might become linked more closely to that of the basic competencies and TCP, most likely intensifying the steering effect of the lists as more people and things become part of their (net)work. What these examples highlight, we argue, is that an either-or debate on the (un)desirability of educational standards fails to include the amount of detail necessary to inform the debate on how these standards could or should exactly work in education, what shape they are to take, and in what way their authority to take over the way we think and speak about teaching and education might be strengthened or limited.

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Corresponding author

Carlijne Ceulemans

University of Antwerp & Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

E-mail: carlijne.ceulemans@uantwerpen.be

