

Professionalism Discourses and Neoliberalism in Teacher Education

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This article argues that discourses of “professionalism” can be used in K-12 teaching and teacher education both in the service of neoliberal pressures and to push back against such pressures. By itself, the term “professionalism” is not evidence of either the spread of or resistance against neoliberalism, but considered in the context of a broader discourse, it may be used for both. The argument draws from Derrida’s discussion of the pharmakon, and Bourdieu’s discussion of symbolic capital. We argue that the concept of professionalism functions as a pharmakon in that it can be both toxic and medicinal, depending on how it is used, by whom, and to what ends. We take up Schinkel and Noordegraaf’s (2011) suggestion of enhancing Bourdieu’s framework of symbolic capital with that of professional capital. Considering professionalism as a kind of symbolic capital provides a critical lens on discourses of professionalism as both a help and a hindrance in K-12 teaching and teacher education. Both theoretical perspectives enable a critical questioning of discourses of professionalism, including for their constraining effect on greater diversity in professions.

Cet article affirme que les discours sur le « professionnalisme » peuvent servir dans l’enseignement K-12 et dans la formation des enseignants, tant au service des pressions néolibérales que pour résister à ces pressions. En soi, le terme « professionnalisme » n’indique ni l’expansion du néolibéralisme ni l’opposition à ce phénomène; considéré dans un contexte élargi, le terme peut être employé dans les deux cas. Cet argument repose sur la discussion de Derrida sur le pharmakon et celle de Bourdieu sur le capital symbolique. Nous affirmons que le concept du professionnalisme fonctionne comme pharmakon dans le sens qu’il peut être ou bien un poison ou un médicament selon l’emploi qu’on en fait, la personne qui s’en sert et les raisons pour lesquelles on l’utilise. Nous faisons suite à la suggestion de Schinkel et Noordegraaf (2011) d’appuyer la notion du capital symbolique de Bourdieu avec celle du capital professionnel. Le fait de concevoir le professionnalisme comme une sorte de capital symbolique offre un angle critique pour étudier les discours proposant que le professionnalisme peut constituer un appui ou un obstacle dans l’enseignement K-12 et dans la formation des enseignants. Les deux perspectives théoriques permettent une remise en question des discours sur le professionnalisme, y compris de leur effet restrictif sur une plus grande diversité au sein des professions.

In this article, we argue that discourses of “professionalism” can be used in the fields of K-12 teaching and teacher education both in the service of neoliberal pressures and to push back against such pressures. By itself, the term “professionalism” shows neither that neoliberalism is

affecting teaching and teacher education, nor that it is being resisted, but considered in the context of a broader discourse, both may be the case. To advance our argument, we will draw from two theoretical perspectives, one philosophical, the other sociological: the first is Jacques Derrida's discussion of the *pharmakon*, while the second is Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of symbolic capital.

In the first part of the article we argue that the concept of professionalism functions as a *pharmakon* in that it can be both toxic and medicinal, depending on how it is used, by whom, and to what ends. In the second part of the article we follow Willem Schinkel and Mirko Noordegraaf's (2011) suggestion of enhancing Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital by considering professional capital as a particular form of symbolic capital. This allows us to discuss further how discourses of professionalism can be both a help and a hindrance in the fields of K-12 teaching and teacher education.

By "neoliberal pressures" we mean, in particular, the expansion of the economic logics of the market to areas that have not traditionally been governed by such market logics. This is in line with David Harvey's (2007) understanding of neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (p. 22). From a neoliberal perspective, the state should dismantle policy and institutional frameworks that are perceived as hindering entrepreneurial freedoms and markets, and at the same time "create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (p. 22). This means, for example, that areas that have not traditionally been regulated by market forces but that shape social contexts or otherwise affect markets—most notably education and healthcare—should be brought in line with those same market logics.

Harvey (2007) writes that neoliberalism has resulted not only in "institutional reform" but also in concomitant "discursive adjustment" (p. 23). One of those discursive adjustments is that the language of quality control through standardization and standardized assessment has become normalized well outside of the industrial arena in which it was first developed (see, for example, Ball, 1997). This is certainly the case for education, which has shifted from being conceptualized as a public service to a competitive resource. As Raewyn Connell (2013) puts it, "increasingly, education has been defined as an industry, and educational institutions have been forced to conduct themselves more and more like profit-seeking firms" (p. 99).

Accountability through external or independent quality control has replaced the trust that used to be granted to professionals. As Julia Evetts (2006) explains, "the conditions of trust, discretion and competence, which historically have been deemed to be necessary for professional practice, are continually being challenged or certainly changed" (p. 515). As neoliberal forces suggest that professionals demonstrate their "professionalism" in ways that can be standardized and measured, professionals can resort to the concept of professionalism to claim greater professional autonomy and resist such demands for the external assessment of competence. Evetts writes: "The discourse of professionalism is ... claimed by both sides in disputes and political and policy arguments and disagreements between professional workers and governments" (p. 522). This article addresses this dual use of discourses of professionalism especially in the fields of K-12 teaching and teacher education, as well as the tensions between the two uses.

Professionalism as Pharmakon

In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Jacques Derrida (1972/1981) offers a reading of Plato’s text *Phaedrus*. In particular, Derrida addresses the legend that Socrates recounts of the Egyptian god Theuth bequeathing the use of writing to King Thamus. Writing is described as *pharmakon*, which is typically translated as a “remedy”; in other words, the tools and techniques of writing are a remedy for our inability to remember what was spoken. Theuth said: “This discipline ... my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories ...: my invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom” (*Phaedrus* 274c-e, as cited in Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 75).

In the discussion that ensues, it becomes clear that there is another, quite different way to read writing, and thus the concept of the *pharmakon*. Rather than helping us to remember, writing induces forgetfulness, as having a written record dispenses with the need to remember what was spoken. The *pharmakon* is both remedy and poison or, using a current English word with a similar ambivalent meaning, a drug that can be both healing and harmful.

In the context of critical considerations of neoliberalism in teacher education, we argue that the discourse of professionalism in teacher education is functioning as a *pharmakon*. We do not believe this discourse has descended to us from an Egyptian god, but nonetheless the discourse of professionalism can be both medicinal and toxic to teacher educators and the teaching profession, more generally. The discourse of professionalism is both a threat and a promise, both a tool of neoliberalism and an opportunity for resistance against neoliberalism. As a remedy, the discourse of professionalism allows teachers and teacher educators to strengthen their case that teaching is a profession, in the sociological sense of an occupation that is granted a significant degree of autonomy and self-regulation. As a poison, the discourse of professionalism can be used to break professional standards down into ever more specific competencies, which can subsequently be assessed and regulated.

One specific example is the discourse on “best practices” in teacher education. While “best practices” seem to convey a positive sense of professionalism (i.e., professional teachers using and sharing the best teaching practices), it can simultaneously display a neoliberal logic of standardization. Taylor Webb (2017) argues that “best practices” often represent mechanistic and prescribed logics of education and thus “[are] produced from reductionist science and measured within the economic rationalities of neoliberalism” (p. 299).

Returning to Derrida’s work, we could say that the discourse of professionalism is both a *pharmakon* and a “supplement.” In the Derridean logic of supplementarity, the supplement is never merely an add-on that can be removed as easily as it was introduced. Derrida (1967/1976) explains that “the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void” (p. 145, emphasis in original). As Claudia Ruitenberg (2009) puts it, “Once the supplement is removed, it reveals a lack and dependence in what was considered complete and originary” (p. 315).

The supplementary nature of the *pharmakon* may appear to be an esoteric concern, far removed from discourses of professionalism in teacher education. However, we believe that the nature of the supplement provides insight into one of the effects of discourses of professionalism in teaching and teacher education, namely that we have become used to them and now perceive teaching and teacher education as deficient when they are absent. Teaching and teacher education existed long before they came to be talked about as more or less “professional.” The discourse of professionalism was an addition but, just as Derrida explains about the supplement,

it is an addition that has become so firmly installed in the world of teaching and teacher education that it now appears something is missing if we do not speak and think about teaching and teacher education as being “professional” and “meeting professional standards.” Teaching and teacher education have always had practices that worked well or not so well for particular subject matter or for particular students, practices that were more or less respectful of students, and so forth. However, only after the discourse of professionalism came to supplement these practices did it become possible to think of them as “unprofessional” or “lacking professionalism” when that supplement was removed.

The discourse of professionalism in teaching and in teacher education cannot be separated from the structural changes in the field. The assumption that society should provide quality education for all students regardless of their social location is challenged by a neoliberal competitive model of education that pits schools (both nationally and internationally) in a competition against each other. Alternative models of teacher education by for-profit companies challenge the role of university pre-service teacher education and draw a new connection between professionalism, accountability and profit.

Ken Zeichner (2014) explains the differences between these two approaches to professionalism:

On the one hand, some propose building or maintaining a professional teaching force and a system of teacher education that prepares teachers for professional roles and teaching careers (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005). Others believe that it is too costly to build and maintain a professional teaching force to teach everyone’s children and have advocated preparing teachers of ‘other people’s children’ as technicians to implement the teaching scripts with which they are provided, in the belief that the preparation these teachers receive and the subsequent scripting of instruction will lead to improvements in pupils’ standardised test scores. (pp. 551-552)

Lessons from Medicine

We draw lessons for teaching from another profession in which the discourse of professionalism is influential today: medicine. Discourses of professionalism affect a strong profession such as medicine differently from a semi-profession such as nursing (see Evetts, 2003; Etzioni, 1969). Teaching is more akin to nursing in its status as semi-profession, having features of professions, such as degrees of self-regulation but also features of non-professional occupations, such as unions. Nonetheless, developments in the professional regulation of medicine and medical education are illustrative for understanding the dual use and effect of the discourse of professionalism in teaching and teacher education.

In the 1990s the Royal College of Physician and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) developed a framework of standards for medical specialists in Canada, culminating in the report *Skills for the New Millennium: Report of the Societal Needs Working Group* (Frank et al., 1996). In 2005, this framework was updated and named the *CanMEDS 2005 Physician Competency Framework*; it became the basis for the RCPSC’s educational standards (RCPSC, 2017, para. 2). As Cynthia Whitehead, Zubin Austin, and Brian Hodges (2011) explain, the CanMEDS framework was developed on the basis of earlier work in the Educating Future Physicians of Ontario (EFPO) roles project. They write that “EFPO began in reaction to a physician strike in Ontario in 1986” (p. 683) and that the desire to articulate and delineate physicians’ multiple roles was a direct response to social questions about the expertise and autonomy of the medical

profession: “Medicine’s status had been threatened by negative public perceptions of physicians in the Ontario doctor’s strike about billing, and was being eroded by challenges to medical expertise and medical authority over both the processes and content of medical care” (p. 690).

As the work on the CanMEDS progressed, and as is clearly visible in the most recent (2015) iteration of the framework, the language of “roles” has become increasingly supplanted by the language of “competencies”; each role is defined by a cluster of “key” and “enabling” competencies. This development has occurred in the face of long-standing concerns about the idea of competencies (e.g., Grant, 1999; Huddle & Heudebert, 2007).

The deployment of discourses of professionalism in medical education provides valuable lessons for teacher education. While the concept of “roles” is not without its problems (see Whitehead et al., 2011), there is positive potential for professional autonomy and self-regulation in thinking from within the profession about the multiple roles members of the profession should fulfill. The CanMEDS framework articulates the multiple roles that a physician must be able to fulfill in addition to being a medical expert in order to be considered a full physician: Communicator, Collaborator, Leader, Health Advocate, Scholar, and Professional. We can certainly ask critical questions about whether all of these are conceptually coherent as roles or whether some are better understood as attributes (see Ruitenberg, 2016), but the idea that professionals have multiple professional roles and that these roles may require different sets of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, is in itself quite valuable. As a framework of roles, the CanMEDS indicates clearly, for example, that a physician has responsibilities not only to individual patients but also to other physicians, to colleagues from other health professions on interprofessional teams, to medical students and residents, and even to patient populations.

In teaching, and in the education of teachers, it would similarly be fruitful to discuss the multiple roles teachers must fulfill in addition to being pedagogical and curricular experts. Since teachers also often have to collaborate on interprofessional teams (for example, with school psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers, and so forth), would the role of Collaborator be a relevant one to articulate? And what about the role of Educational Advocate? The Dean of the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education, Blye Frank, drew this parallel in 2012 in an article by Katie Hyslop in the online newspaper *The Tyee*:

All residents within medicine are required to meet seven competencies One of the competencies is advocate, and it would seem to me that's not about necessarily marching in the streets and being an advocate—one could do that if one chose to. But it might be advocating for better healthcare policies and procedures. (para. 5)

The role of advocate is relevant to teachers, too, Frank argues and, as is the case with physicians, the role can range from more activist forms to smaller acts of advocacy on behalf of an individual student: “advocacy can be as little as pushing for more supplies in the classroom or better learning resources for one special needs child” (para. 6). We agree with Frank that the development of a roles framework can be a helpful interpretation of the discourse of professionalism for and by teachers, one that does not prescribe but that acknowledges the much broader roles that teachers fulfill in society.

There is, however, a flipside of the pharmakon, where the medicinal drug turns toxic, and it is visible in the same CanMEDS Framework. Frank said not that medical residents are required to fulfill seven roles, but rather that they are required to meet seven competencies (in Hyslop, 2012). Where we believe that the articulation of multiple roles is helpful for physicians, teachers,

and other professionals, seeing these roles as competency domains, within which detailed lists of competencies are outlined that need to be taught and assessed, is harmful. In order to explain the harm done by the reduction of roles to competencies, we turn to the work of William Sullivan, Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Sullivan's (2000) discussion of the state of professions in an article in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* includes a warning that, we believe, is especially important for the teaching profession. He asks,

Can a profession secure public recognition of its claims to traditional professional prerogatives on the basis of its technical skills alone, or will public support and legal recognition for a profession increasingly require that it demonstrate significant contributions to advancing civic welfare? (p. 674)

It is a rhetorical question, as it is quite clear that Sullivan believes that laying claim to professional prerogatives on the basis of technical skills alone will not suffice today for securing public trust. This is a direct commentary on the rabbit hole of competency frameworks, a rabbit hole that medical professions find themselves in very deeply today. Sullivan concludes—and his comments clearly have relevance beyond medicine: “If the professions are to have a future, they may need to make their case on the basis of a social and moral rather than a wholly technical understanding of what it is that professionals are about” (p. 675).

The reduction of professional roles to sets of competencies is harmful precisely because it emphasizes the technical skills and loses sight of the larger moral and social understanding of what the profession is about. Competency frameworks are very good for capturing particular skillsets that are truly skillsets, and of which we want to know with great certainty whether newcomers to the profession have mastered them. However, they are inadequate for capturing the more complex blend of being not just trained but educated, being a member of a moral profession, having public trust for self-regulation, and having the understanding and dispositions to fulfill one's multiple roles responsibly (see also Grant, 1999; Huddle & Heudebert, 2007). The discourse of professionalism is a threat rather than a promise if it becomes an excuse for a reductive consideration and regulation of professionalism as a set of competencies.

A further risk of the concepts of roles and competencies is that they tend to formalize the ideas and conventions of those who are currently members of the profession; as a result, the profession becomes less open to diversity. This is a concern for the education of both physicians and teachers, professions that, in a country such as Canada, must be responsive to highly diverse populations of patients and students. The language of professional roles and competencies appears neutral and disguises the fact that roles and competencies are conceived and framed in particular ways at particular times and in particular places. As Whitehead et al. (2011) write about roles, these “are not, simply, impartial abstractions that objectively describe a professional. Instead, they are historically and socially derived, and influenced by many forces and factors” (p. 691). The same, write Scott Reeves, Ann Fox, and Brian Hodges (2009), is true for competencies, which “reflect [the] particular views of what constitutes ‘best practice’ at the point in time they were created” by a selection of “professional experts” (p. 452). They comment:

While such processes convey a sense of legitimacy and rigor, they nevertheless reflect and reinforce the current thinking of a limited few who occupy dominant professional positions They may therefore be regarded as reinforcing conventional discourses about professional norms, behaviours

and attitudes, and perpetuating existing domains of professional legitimacy. Furthermore, once competency frameworks are adopted and implemented, there appear few mechanisms available to support the introduction of new and innovative ideas that offer contrasting perspectives for practice. (p. 452)

Such conventions can be especially closed to the perspectives of those educated elsewhere, such as International Medical Graduates or Internationally Educated Teachers seeking entry to their respective professions in a new country. This concern with the constraining effects of “professionalism” discourses on diversity will also be evident in the second theoretical lens we discuss: that of “professional capital.”

Professionalism as Capital¹

Pierre Bourdieu has referred to social worlds as “fields” and has argued that fields are positioned in relation to other fields within a surrounding context of power. Fields are defined by their degree of autonomy and their location within the field of power, and positioned according to their relative capital (Bourdieu, 1985). In any given field, “the kinds of capital, like the aces in a game of cards, are powers which define the chances of profit” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724).

Bourdieu (1997) has defined three main forms of capital that are being traded within diverse fields. Economic capital equates to one’s material and financial worth, while social capital includes an individual’s access to political power and networks. Cultural capital is the most abstract form of capital, referring to assets in the realms of taste, values, beliefs, and knowledge. The value of each form of capital is determined by the specificity of the field, as well as by its location in the global social space.

In addition, “symbolic” capital is the symbolic power—in the form of prestige or recognition—that can be associated with all three of the abovementioned forms. As Bourdieu (1985) puts it:

Symbolic capital—another name for distinction—is nothing other than capital, in whatever form, when perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the internalization (embodiment) of the structure of its distribution, i.e., when it is known and recognized as self-evident. (p. 731)

According to Bourdieu, capital has no intrinsic value. It is part of the machinery of power, creating distinctions that are arbitrary in nature. In any given field the dominating agents need to gain legitimacy in order to maintain their status. Legitimacy is often gained symbolically rather than economically; thus, the hidden arbitrariness of symbolic capital is necessary for the reproduction of dominance. Symbolic capital can increase the “symbolic profits” of dominant agents in a field while extracting “symbolic violence” on others (Bourdieu, 1997; Reay, 2004). For example, accents in speech are associated with and used as a mark of distinction between social classes and geographical locations. Violence can be exerted through judgments of those who don’t speak “properly,” even though the accents themselves have no intrinsic value.

Bourdieu showed little interest in the concept of professionalism because it takes the status distinction between professions and other kinds of occupations, such as trades, as given. He suggested replacing the concept of profession with the concept of “field,” which highlights conflict within the formation of professions. However, Dutch sociologists Noordegraaf and

Schinkel (2011) argue that Bourdieu's social theory is "well-equipped to understand the evolution of professionalism and professional practices" (p. 98). They further suggest that the Bourdieuan conceptual frame is useful for understanding "the creation of new professional fields and for understanding conflicts within and between professional fields" (p. 100).

Within the formation of professional fields, Noordegraaf and Schinkel (2011) propose "professional capital" as an extension of Bourdieu's work on types of capital. More specifically, they write:

When we regard professionalism as a form of symbolic capital, we therefore see this symbolic capital as continuously at stake both within professional fields—where its legitimate substance is contested—and within the larger field of power. In the latter, professional fields compete for social status with other fields. (p. 105)

Hence, professional capital can be understood as the symbolic capital that is valued in specific professional fields as well as in the wider social arena. We agree with Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) that it is productive to understand professional capital as a form of symbolic capital because it allows for a view of the process of "professionalization" as "a process of struggle over the attainment of professionalism as symbolic capital" (p. 89).

The concept of professional capital captures both how professional fields are positioned in relation to each other, and how distinctions are made within professional fields.² Individuals possess professional capital in the sociological sense through membership of a certain profession; for instance, a surgeon has greater professional capital than a nurse. At the same time, some surgeons have more professional capital than other surgeons. Professional capital, then, can be used inter-professionally to analyze how professional fields are positioned in relation to each other in the wider societal space, as well as intra-professionally to analyze the levels of symbolic capital different agents possess within a specific professional field. For example, Monika Djerf-Pierre (2005) explains how being a woman diminishes one's symbolic capital in the field of journalism, and affects one's chances of accruing professional capital in this field, understood as "a specific form of symbolic capital that is acquired by professional experience of the media field in general and particularly in holding managerial positions" (p. 274).

Bourdieu's objections to the concept of "profession" need to be reconsidered in light of the processes of professionalization and deprofessionalization happening in different professions today. While Bourdieu might have been concerned that declaring an occupational field a "profession" would shield it from critical considerations of the power relations within that field, many professional groups today, including teachers, are experiencing demands for greater external accountability and thus an erosion of one of the key features of a profession: self-regulation (Grimmett & Young, 2012). The concept of professional capital is useful in capturing the external forces that shape professional fields nowadays and the attempt "to distinguish old from new professional work, especially in neoliberal, economized times" (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011, p. 111).

Moreover, as Amitai Etzioni (1969) pointed out more than four decades ago, and we referred to earlier in relation to Evetts' (2003) work, not all professions are created equal. Etzioni qualified education, nursing, and social work as "semi-professions" because they have a lower social status than the professions of medicine and law and because external regulatory bodies and inter-professional unions frequently co-exist in these fields. Teaching, social work, policing,

and so on are professions in which public safety is at stake. Because of that, they tend to be quite heavily regulated (Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada, 2013). In these professions “there is a regulatory bargain: workers offer good services, for which they receive recognition and status” (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011, pp. 100-101). In regulated professions, professional capital, as a form of symbolic capital, is particularly important as it exceeds the limitations of economic capital in these fields. Traditionally teachers, engineers, or nurses were not judged by their salaries and, thus, their professional prestige had an increased value (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011; Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011).

In such professions, professional capital acts as a form of cultural capital, that is, as a way of distinguishing those who are recognized inside the group (in this case the profession) from those outside of it. One of the challenges in a neoliberal context is that, increasingly, economic indicators are used as measures of value of both the profession as a whole and the individual members of that profession. In the past, a teacher’s professional capital was perhaps based on the number of years of teaching experience and the breadth of teaching experience across different grades or in different schools. In a neoliberal context, teachers’ professional capital is connected more closely to their students’ performance on standardized tests, the school’s rankings, their ability to implement “best practices,” and their recognition through “excellence” and “innovation” awards. Moreover, the teacher’s ability to speak “professionally” has changed, as the economic discourse of “benchmarks” and “performance indicators” has crept into the field of education and teachers are increasingly expected to be able to use such economic discourse (see Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009).

As the earlier discussion about the development of the CanMEDS framework for Canadian physicians illustrates, the desire to define more clearly what constitutes the professional competence of members of a profession is often a response to concerns about the quality of the service provided by members of that profession. As Whitehead et al. (2011) write about medical education, “In an era where concerns around quality, patient safety, and error raise questions about standards of care, there is a call to find better ways to demonstrate that trainees are able to manage the complexities of practice” (p. 682). This language could be adapted to teacher education, where concerns around teachers’ content knowledge and pedagogical skills have raised questions about standards of teaching (see, for example, Connell, 2009). However, the concern with professional quality and the desire to protect patients from inadequate medical care and students from inadequate education leads to a false sense that discourses of professionalism and professional quality are culturally neutral.

This is important because, under the neoliberal push to standardize teaching and break it into measurable tasks, professional norms increasingly take on the appearance of universality and neutrality (Evetts, 2006). However, as Alex Moore (2004) claims, “the concept of the good teacher cannot sit ‘outside’ or untouched by the larger social conversations, situations, ideologies and purposes within which it is situated: it cannot easily, therefore, make claims to ‘universality’” (p. 36). Unwritten professional norms affect immigrant professionals in particular:

The concept of professional capital is useful to unveil systemic obstacles to immigrants’ success within various professional fields, including, for instance, the health professions. Research in the UK, US, and Canada alike has found that internationally educated nurses and medical graduates are confronted with British, American, and Canadian conceptions of ‘the good nurse’ or ‘the good doctor’.

(Chen, Nuñez-Smith, Bernheim, Berg, Goxu, & Curry, 2010; Singh & Sochan, 2010; Slowther, Hundt, Taylor, & Purkis, 2009, as cited in Marom, 2019, p. 87)

Recertification processes, particularly in regulated professions, are important because they address prevalent knowledge, local policies, and cultural nuances that newcomers to the profession may not be familiar with. Yet, as Noordegraaf & Schinkel (2011) explain, “professionalism rests upon (reproduced) micro-practices even as these practices are being socially (re)constituted by macro-structures, such as fields, class and wider contexts” (p. 105). Hence, recertification processes might reflect arbitrary practices that gained prominence within the historical construction of a certain professional field.

Bourdieu argues that the particular form of capital that is valued in a distinct field should be examined empirically. While Bourdieu argues that capital is an arbitrary tool to maintain power, in the case of professional capital one cannot assume that all professional guidelines are merely arbitrary. One may argue that the construction of classical music as “high culture” and of rap music as “street culture” reflects cultural hierarchies rather than quality distinction; yet in the field of medicine, for instance, some practices might be proven to be more effective in saving patients’ lives.

Similarly, in the field of teaching, we argue that professional capital is an accumulation of both arbitrary and non-arbitrary components. For example, some teaching strategies and practices might lead to deeper learning, or increase students’ success. Other practices might be promoted because they fit within the historical construction of the field and reflect the preferences of dominant agents. Since teaching is a complex and context-dependent profession that does not subscribe to universal guidelines, we need to be careful not to “promote a ‘one size fits all’ notion of good teaching” (Pratt, 2002, p. 5).

Professional capital, then, includes teaching approaches and practices for which there is good evidence, as well as more arbitrary markers of distinction. As we have noted, both are subject to neoliberal pressures such as the increasing adoption of and assumed fluency with economic discourse. The benefit of the concept of professional capital is that it disrupts the idea that professionalism reflects neutral and objective expectations of professional expertise. Demands of professionalism need to be located in a specific field (in this case, teacher education) and to be analyzed as a form of symbolic capital.

Conclusion

The concept of professional capital can be used to argue for professional autonomy and self-regulation: the idea is that only those with relevant professional capital have the expertise and credibility to participate in the regulation of the professionalism of others in the field. Members of the teaching profession might argue, for instance, that only those with extensive “classroom experience” in public schools, for instance, should be involved in the teaching profession’s self-regulation. Conversely, like with any other form of capital, there can be external efforts to codify this capital so that it can be used to measure and assess in a more standardized way whether someone seeking entry to the profession does or does not have the requisite professional capital.

Those within a profession can use a discourse of “professionalism” to argue for the preservation or re-establishment of professional autonomy. To state forces that threaten professional autonomy by suggesting more standardized forms of professional certification and accreditation, they say, “Trust our professional judgement.” Conversely, those outside of a

profession can use a discourse of “professionalism” to argue for external regulatory standards and the loosening of professional autonomy. To those inside the profession, they say, “We don’t trust your professional judgement and want a more reliable and standardized form of quality control.”

The neoliberal conceptualization of education as a competitive resource has increased the push toward external control and standards in education and subjected education to economic measures of efficiency and competitiveness. This shift is accompanied by a withdrawal of funding by governmental bodies and increased intervention of private players in the field of education (Zeichner, 2014). In the Canadian context, this is evident in the inclusion of the teaching profession under the “Agreement on Internal Trade” (AIT), which imposes governmental standards on teaching and makes it easier for teachers educated in Canada to move between the provinces (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2010). Peter Grimmett and Jon Young (2012) argue that the AIT is a “Trojan Horse” in which, “under the guise of increasing labour mobility,” officials in charge of teacher certification overlook the standardization and de-regulation of the teaching profession that “alter[s] the standing of teaching as a profession in itself” (p. 95). Furthermore, teacher education programs often turn into “money-makers” for low-resource education departments in neoliberal universities (Grimmett & Young, 2012), which can impede the development of a critical and contextualized conception of professionalism that is internal to the profession. In this context, using a discourse of “professionalism” to reclaim professional autonomy and insist on teachers’ ability to self-govern as professionals, rather than be governed as workers or “mobile labour,” may have some potential.

Understanding the discourse of professionalism as *pharmakon* or as a form of symbolic capital helps us to see more sharply how discourses of professionalism serve both neoliberal and anti-neoliberal purposes. These theoretical perspectives also help us see how the desire to assure professional quality can create barriers for those whose perspectives could diversify the profession.

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Notes

1 This conceptual framing was previously used in Marom and Ilieva, 2016 and Marom, 2019.

2 The concept of professional capital was previously used in an educational context by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012). Hargreaves and Fullan use the concept of professional capital as a tool for “transforming teaching in every school” (page number needed). They identify and critique many of the current educational reform movements that aim at reducing teaching to robotic labour while conforming to external accountability, and highlight instead the importance of conceptualizing the teaching profession through collective and communal capital. In this article we use the concept of professional capital as a sociological frame to capture external pressures that the teaching profession faces in a neoliberal era, as well as the internal distinctions within the field.

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