

# Contextualizing Teacher Professionalism: Findings from a Cross-Case Analysis of Union Active Teachers

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*This paper draws on data collected as part of a study of the discourses of teacher professionalism amongst union active teachers in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario. Interviews revealed a triad of influences on the professionalism discourses of participants: engagement in teacher associations, the larger policy environment, and teacher agency. The manner in which this triad played out in each case, however, was unique to the particular political and organizational contexts framing the spaces in which such discourses were created. Using cross-case analysis, this paper specifically highlights the complex and contextualized nature of teachers' conceptions of professionalism, paying particular attention to the nuanced enabling and limiting conditions identified between the cases.*

*Cet article s'appuie sur des données recueillies dans le contexte d'une étude portant sur le discours concernant le professionnalisme des enseignants actifs dans leur syndicat et vivant dans les provinces canadiennes de l'Alberta et de l'Ontario. Les entrevues ont révélé une triade d'influences sur ce discours chez les participants : l'implication dans des associations d'enseignants, le contexte politique général et l'agentivité des enseignants. L'interaction de ces composantes s'est déroulée d'une façon distincte selon le contexte politique et organisationnel du milieu dans lequel le discours a été créé. S'appuyant sur une analyse transversale, cet article souligne la nature complexe et contextualisée des conceptions qu'ont les enseignants du professionnalisme, et se penche particulièrement sur les conditions nuancées, favorables ou restrictives, qui ont été identifiées dans chaque cas.*

Discursive perspectives emphasize the social nature of meaning-making and highlight the importance of power in shaping not only what people say, but also what people do. Discourse does not occur within a vacuum; rather it takes shape within a highly politicized arena of socialization where language plays a significant role in the maintenance of particular power structures and the cultures that support them (Hilferty, 2004). As Hilferty (2004) contends, then, discourses “are not therefore limited to spoken language, but also arise from institutional practices and inherent power relations” (p. 62). Thus, discourse is more than a description or even an explanation of meaning; discourse contributes to the creation of a particular reality (Thomas, 2005). In this vein, discourses of teacher professionalism serve to “shape the way teachers think, talk, and act in relation to themselves as teachers individually and collectively” (Sachs, 2003, p. 122), eventually influencing the blueprint of what it means to be a professional teacher.

Drawing on data from a larger study exploring the professionalism discourses of a sample of union active teachers in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario, teacher professionalism in this paper is conceived of as a site of ideological struggle influenced by power and politics that shifts and changes over time as teachers, their unions, the public and governments respond to each other in new and evolving ways. To this end, the paper specifically explores unique political and organizational contexts framing the spaces in which such discourses are created in order to highlight the complex and contextualized nature of teachers' conceptions of themselves as professionals.

## **The History and Evolution of Teacher Professionalism**

Notions of professionalism have evolved differently in different professions (Evetts, 2003; 2011). In education, governments have attempted to professionalize teaching through formal policies while teachers and teacher associations have also espoused and enacted their own conceptions of teacher professionalism (Ozga & Lawn, 1981). According to Hargreaves (2000), the evolution of the idea of teacher professionalism can be categorized into four broad historical phases: the pre-professional, the autonomous professional, the collegial professional and the post-professional. During much of the first three of these phases, government involvement in teacher professionalism was somewhat distant (Day, 2002). Teachers and their unions were given responsibility for and granted considerable autonomy in establishing standards of teacher quality (Ozga, 1995), curriculum and pedagogy (Hargreaves, 2000).

Beginning in the late 1980s, however, in the so-called "Second Way" (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) of educational reform, Lawn and Ozga (1986) proposed that the locus of control shifted and management of teaching became much more direct. Within this context, governments around the globe began externally imposing a particular discourse of professionalism in a more immediate and top-down manner as they began to move forward with right-winged, neo-liberal political agendas and language centered on market-economies and gaining a competitive edge (Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Robertson, 1996). More recently, Robertson (2012) has argued that this shift in control and governance of the work of teachers has occurred on a global scale. Focus has shifted from that of accountability of competent professionals to compliance and control through the use of test-based accountability, merit pay, published league tables of student achievement, and imposed professional codes of conduct (Carter, Stevenson, & Passy, 2010; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Kuehn, 2006b; Martell, 2006; Poole, 2007; Robertson & Smaller, 1996; Stevenson, 2007).

Such reforms have manifested themselves in various jurisdictions. For instance, Codd (2005) described teachers in New Zealand as becoming "increasingly 'managed' so that their productivity could be measured in terms of the test results and examination performances of their students" (p. 194). Similar conditions have also been experienced in England, where schools who do not reach achievement targets are categorized as being in need of "special measures," sometimes resulting in the removal of teachers and headmasters or the complete closure of schools (Day, 2002). Likewise, in the United States, reforms like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have resulted in the creation of state imposed policies that include performance pay, new teacher evaluation procedures, rigid testing and reporting, adequate yearly progress targets, and penalties for failing schools (Apple, 2006; Ravitch, 2010).

While Canadian educational reform policies have not employed the "blame and shame" methods discussed above, beginning in the 1990s, most provincial governments began

centralizing decision-making by downsizing the number of school boards (Fleming, 1997; Galway 2012; Osmond, 2008). In line with this, provincial governments in various provinces unilaterally mandated significant policy reforms regarding curriculum, accountability and testing, teacher working conditions, and teacher professional development (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2007).

Brennan (as cited in Sachs, 2003) referred to the deficit discourses created by neoliberal reforms and as “managerial professionalism,” and, according to Sachs (2003), it is this view of professionalism that forms the dominant discourse in much of the industrialized world. Here, the professional teacher is one who meets organizational goals, works efficiently to meet “one size fits all” benchmarks of student achievement, and documents this process for the accountability of the system. Sachs (2003), however, also discusses what she refers to as “democratic” discourses of professionalism. Unlike managerial discourses, which reinforce traditional hierarchies, democratic discourses of professionalism are rooted in teacher empowerment. Teachers are encouraged to “contribute actively to the promotion of educational reform and wider societal change” (Webb et al., 2004, p. 87), though the creation of innovative teacher leadership opportunities and self-directed professional learning experiences. However, enacting democratic discourses against a systematic backdrop of narrow ideas of teachers’ work is a challenging and risky endeavor. To that end, many teachers do so through active participation in teacher unions, where alternatives to neoliberal conceptions of teacher professionalism are supported through networking and collective strength.

### **Teacher Unions and Discourses of Professionalism**

Operating in a policy context characterized by mandates, fiscal constraint, accountability measures, and an increased role of the state in educational decision-making has often forced teacher unions to resort to traditional tactics of adversarial collective bargaining and labour action (Murphy, 1990; Smaller, 1991; Urban, 1982). As a consequence of such tactics, teacher unions have often been portrayed as militant, unprofessional, and selfishly concerned with “bread and butter” issues of salary and benefits (Bascia, 2009).

The teacher organizations referenced in this paper, however, have expanded their sphere of influence to include policymaking, professional learning, and teacher leadership. Within this context, their work challenges narrow views of teacher unions and instead embodies the ideals of “new unionism” (Urban, 2004) or “professional unionism” (Kerchner & Koppich, 1993), which reconceives teacher unions as having a legitimate and important role in educational reform. A different picture of teacher unions begins to emerge: one that portrays unions as having the capacity to engage teachers in a host of professional experiences and advocacy work that facilitates the enactment of broader discourses of teacher professionalism.

For instance, Bangs and Frost (2012), suggest that teacher unions can “provide the confidence and conditions for promoting teachers’ professional autonomy and leadership” as well as ensuring that “teachers’ voices are heard in the process of educational reform” (p. 44). This is perhaps best illustrated through the work of Hilferty (2004, 2008), who specifically studied the discourses of teacher professionalism of executive members in two teacher subject associations in Australia. Organizations that provide subject specific professional development, teacher subject associations are often extensions of teacher unions, as is the case in most Canadian provinces. Moreover, like unions, these associations often engage in the politics of policy-making, specifically in the area of curriculum. Hilferty (2008), however, identified them

as having another significance, “affirming the central role that these associations play as active participants in the social construction of teacher professionalism” (p. 240).

### **The Socio-Political Nature of Discourse of Professionalism**

Notions of professionalism are a product of the power relations inherent in the socio-political nature of their construction. According to Hilferty (2004), for Foucault, “power is a ubiquitous feature of human interaction” (p. 61) such that power is involved in all social actions and processes. Moreover, power relations “cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault, 1983, p. 93), which represent and shape both social practices and the meaning derived from such relations. As such, in her exploration of the professionalism discourses of teacher subject associations in Australia, Hilferty (2004) conceptualizes professionalism as an enacted discourse of power that “embraces more than just rhetoric, it also emerges from everyday practice—through the routines in which individuals and groups seek to control the work of teachers” (p.62).

Hilferty (2004) also conceives the enactment of alternative discourses of professionalism as a form of agency since it requires teachers to take an active role in creating both the discursive and non-discursive reality they are aiming to achieve in their professional working lives. In other words:

Teachers cannot restrict their attention to the classroom alone, leaving the larger setting and purposes of schooling to be determined by others ... they need to determine their own agency through a critical and continual evaluation of the purposes, the consequences, and the social context of their calling. (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 11)

Helgøy and Homme (2007) also point out that different teachers may interpret demands for transparency and accountability differently, with some viewing the imposition as a threat to their professionalism and others using it as “an opportunity to demonstrate the value and quality of their work” (p. 234). Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) general definition of agency as “the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations” (p. 971), agency in this paper is seen as the desire of teachers to “actively and purposefully direct their own working lives” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 68). Thus, the notion of agency is key in terms of conceptualizing the power struggle over specific typologies of teacher professionalism and the manner in which different discursive positions are created.

Synthesizing across the literature, I contend then that the professionalism discourses of union active teachers are shaped by the push and pull of three primary dimensions: the personal agency of individual teachers, collective engagement in teacher organizations, and the broader policy context that characterizes the educational landscape within which that engagement and agency occurs. As illustrated in Figure 1, each of the three dimensions interacts with and is impacted by the others. They do not exist in isolation and are not traits on a list of characteristics that define professionalism. Rather, it is the dynamic interplay and inherent tensions between these dimensions that are viewed as influencing and shaping the conceptions of teacher professionalism espoused and enacted by participants in this study.

As indicated by the double arrows, each individual dimension impacts and is impacted by the other dimensions, and one cannot be separated from the others. For instance, union

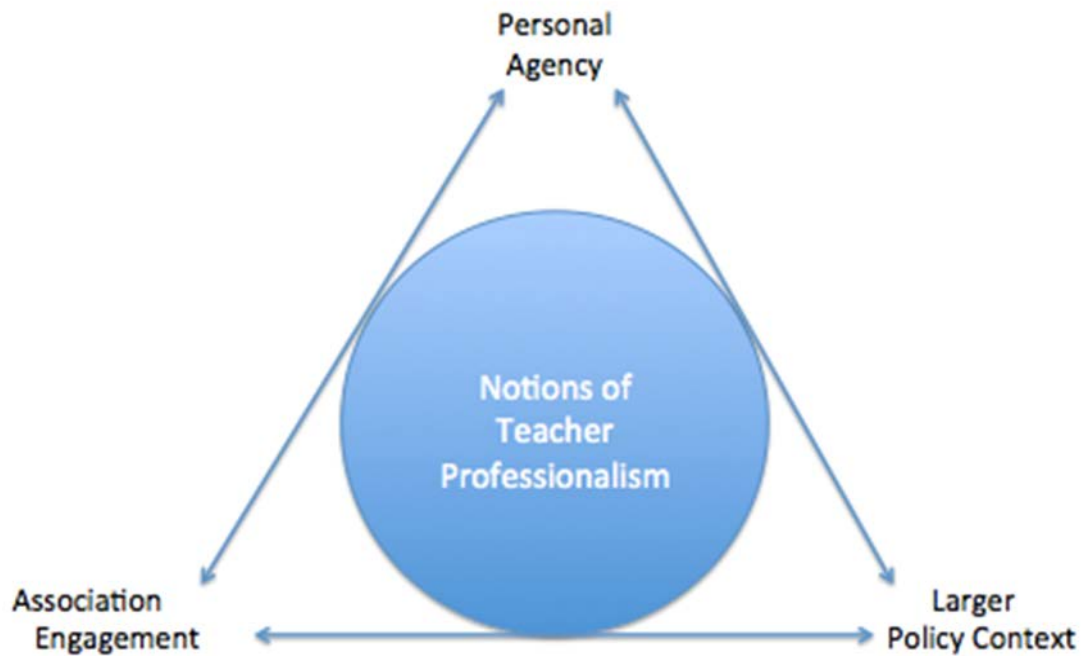


Figure 1. Discourses of Teacher Professionalism amongst Union Active Teachers

engagement is an active choice, a function of one's personal agency. Likewise, union engagement can reinforce personal agency by providing access to a host of professional learning and growth experiences that individuals may not have otherwise had the ability to choose to participate in. Similarly, the work of individual teachers and that of their unions takes place within the broader policy context, with union members individually and collectively inserting their voices into the conversation and advocating for particular policy changes. Inevitably, these discourses find their way into the larger policy environment, which, in turn, through the promotion of its own discourses, impacts the personal agency of individuals and the collective power of union action in a similar manner. It is the nuanced manner in which this triad of influences plays out in diverse political and organizational contexts that is the focus of this paper.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws on data from a comparative case study of discourses of teacher professionalism amongst members of two Canadian teacher organizations, The Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). According to Yin (2003), "You would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (p. 13). To this end, case study methods were specifically chosen for this study since the construction of discourse is a socio-political process best understood in its real-life context.

Conducted in 2013, teacher organizations from the provinces of Ontario and Alberta were chosen for a variety of reasons. Firstly, unique cultural, demographic, and political factors in

each province contribute to the creation of distinct politics of education and particular kinds of relationships between government and the teacher organizations in each province. In these ways, the provinces serve as instances of contrasting cases that illuminate discourses of professionalism from diverse entry points. For instance, Alberta had experienced a relatively stable political climate with the Progressive Conservatives (PC) in power since the 1970s (power changed in 2015 with the election of the New Democrats) while, to the contrary, Ontario had experienced a number of political shifts, with the New Democrat Party (NDP), the PCs, and the Liberals all having held power at some time over the past 20 years. Additionally, teaching in Alberta is a unified profession with both teachers and administrators belonging to the Alberta Teachers' Association, which serves as the only teacher organization in the province. In Ontario, administrators were removed from the membership of teacher organizations in 1994, and teachers belong to one of four teacher organizations; L'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the largest of which are OSSTF and ETFO.

Despite these differences, at the time of the study, teacher organizations in both Ontario and Alberta had experienced periods of relative harmony with respect to their relationship with government as well as periods of intense strife. At various points in their history, managerial discourses of teacher professionalism have also been employed in both provinces, intentionally or unintentionally, under the guise of fiscal uncertainty and efficiency measures. Perhaps as a result of this ebb and flow, the teacher organizations in both contexts have long histories of advocacy work, political engagement, and a strong focus on supporting the professional growth of teachers. In these ways the cases are complementary to each other.

Participants were purposefully selected in order to yield the most compelling data from those who are closely linked to the phenomenon. Specifically, I sought participants who were active members of their respective associations, as evidenced through participation in a host of association work including elected positions on local executive and specialist councils as well as volunteer participation in various research initiatives, professional development programs, and committees. To this end, ETFO introduced the study at the annual Leadership Training workshop held in Toronto on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and the ATA launch took place as part of the Annual Summer Conference held in Banff from August 12-14, 2013, both of which offer leadership development workshops and seminars to some of the most active and involved members in each association.

Thirteen members from the ATA contacted me to express interest in participating in the study—six males and seven females. Teaching careers ranged from nine to thirty-five years; eight were classroom teachers, four were school administrators, and one was a board office consultant. Of the administrators, two still taught half time. The length of time members had been active in the Association also varied: ranging from three years to over twenty. All members had myriad experiences with the Association, serving on a number of committees in a variety of capacities, attending and presenting at various conferences and professional development seminars, and being involved in various political and professional association initiatives at both the local and provincial level, including elected executive positions.

Of the eleven ETFO members who contacted me, ten were female and one was male. Years of teaching experience were similar to that of the ATA members in the study. Ten members were classroom teachers and one was a consultant with a school board. Since administrators were removed from the teacher federations in 1994, there were no principals in the Ontario case.

ETFO involvement again ranged, with half of participants active for their entire careers, three of which totaled over twenty years. With the exception of one participant, who had only recently become involved, the majority of ETFO members in this study had participated in numerous facets of the federation, including serving on local executive councils and a variety of local and provincial committees. All ETFO members had attended a variety of ETFO sponsored professional development programs and conferences, and a number had been involved in political action and protests.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants and ranged from approximately 30 minutes to one hour in duration. Interviews probed participant understanding of teacher professionalism, the roles and boundaries of the work of teachers and the elements that influenced and shaped the enactment of such understandings. Sample questions included “What does professionalism mean to you?”; “What has supported and limited your ability to enact your view of professionalism?”; and “How has your union involvement influenced your view of professionalism?” Interviews were audiotaped with participants’ permission and later transcribed verbatim. Participant checks were used to ensure accuracy. Data analysis was inductive in its approach and utilized the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with open coding. More specifically, I drew from Boeije’s (2002) approach and utilized a 3-step process to first construct each individual case study (steps 1 and 2) and later (step 3), to conduct a cross-case analysis (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, and Lee, 2006).

1. Comparison within a single interview.
2. Comparison between interviews within the same group.
3. Comparison between interviews from different groups.

Open coding was used in steps 1 and 2 to thematically tease out the various representations of the roles and work of teachers contained in the transcripts. I began by first grouping data into large themes such as “work of teachers,” “views of professionalism,” “influences on views,” “supports” and “limitations.” After this was completed, I recoded each large theme into smaller subthemes, comparing and contrasting the various ways in which participants framed their views within each particular theme and subtheme. In step 3, I compared the prevalence of particular discourses and the varied ways in which discourses were represented, influenced, supported, and limited in each context. This allowed me to construct a cross-case analysis that captures the nuances of the discursive arena around teacher professionalism revealed in each case and provide plausible inferences around the ways in which historical and organizational contexts have operated to create similar, yet distinct discourses around teacher professionalism in both milieus.

Although interviews generate in-depth understandings of the perspectives of those who are closest to a phenomenon, utilizing interviews as the only data source is not preferable due to the potential for bias in self-report (Merriam, 2009). Unlike data gathered through the interview process, documents have a stability in terms of their objectiveness because they stand outside of the research in that they were not specifically created in response to the study (Merriam, 2009). As such, I felt it necessary to ground the real-life accounts presented in the interview data within the history and recent activities of each organization as presented in publically available documents. This allowed me to detail not only the discourses of participants; rather, I was able to construct dynamic cases that authentically positioned the evolution of such discourses in relation to the supports and constraints uniquely shaping the discursive arena in each milieu. Specific documents analyzed for each association are listed in Table 1.

## Context of the Study

One of four teacher federations in Ontario, The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) was created in 1998 by the amalgamation of two of Ontario's first teacher organizations—the Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario (FWTAO) and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF) (Richter, 2006). Since that time ETFO has become both a political juggernaut and staunch advocate for teacher rights, perhaps as a result of being born into existence during the reign of Conservative Premier Mike Harris and his political agenda, the "Common Sense Revolution" (Gidney, 1999). More specifically, beginning in 1995, Harris made sweeping changes to education that centralized control over curriculum, student assessment, teacher evaluation and certification, and educational finance (MacLellan, 2009).

One of the first of Harris' reforms was the creation of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), an independent teacher certification agency who would be responsible for accrediting teacher education programs (MacLellan, 2009). The OCT also took charge of disciplinary matters and developing professional standards of practice, which had been previously within the scope of the work of the teacher federations. Following the creation of the OCT, Harris introduced Bill 160 in September of 1997, the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, which changed the legislation around the work of school administrators to emphasize their managerial roles and remove principals and vice-principals from the teacher federations (MacLellan, 2009). Within this context, the late 1990s were rife with work to rule action, strikes, and lockouts (Anderson & Ben Jaffar, 2003).

ETFO was steadfast in its efforts to sway the public discourse through several strong media campaigns. When the government attempted to mandate extra-curricular participation for teachers, ETFO responded with *No More Bullying*, arguing that mandating such activities challenged the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and prompting the government to repeal that section of the bill (Richter, 2007). Likewise, when the government announced a plan for teacher re-certification in 2002 that would require teachers to complete fourteen prescribed PD courses

Table 1

*Overview of document analysis*

Function	ETFO	ATA
History of the Organization	It's Elementary: A brief history of Ontario's public elementary teachers and their federations (authored by a retired ETFO staffer and published as a four part series in ETFO Voice Magazine in 2006-2007)	ATA Magazine Summer 2008 (Special edition chronically the last 10 years of the ATA's involvement in educational politics and reform in Alberta)
Recent Political engagement	Online newspaper articles from various sources including the National Post, CBC, The Huffington Post, The Globe & Mail, & the Toronto Start  ETFO press releases and EFTO Voice editorials from 2010-2014	Online newspaper articles from various sources including the National Post, the CBC, The Huffington Post, The Globe & Mail, & the Edmonton Sun  ATA press releases and ATA Magazine editorials from 2010-2014



every five years in order to maintain their teaching certificate, ETFO advised members to boycott the program and began offering its own three-day Summer Conference for teachers across the province (DeQuetteville, 2008). In the fall of 2003 a new Liberal government was elected. Almost immediately, new Premier Dalton McGuinty went about reversing some of Harris' mandates and announced a three-year plan to invest \$1.6 million in educational funding. Moreover, in 2006 McGuinty provided ETFO with \$7.8 million to expand existing professional development offerings such as Summer Academy and developed new programs around teacher research.

By 2012-13, however, teacher federations in Ontario had once again found themselves countering mandated changes in the form of the *Putting Students First Act*. Repealed just 20 days after it had been enacted, the bill imposed a new contract that stripped teachers of negotiated pay increases, reduced teacher sick time benefits, and removed teachers' right to strike (Howlett, 2012). ETFO engaged their members in a province-wide withdrawal of extracurricular services in opposition to the bill and began one-day rotating strikes across numerous school boards (ETFO, 2013; Skorbach, 2012). Media outlets were replete with coverage of the walkouts and the work to rule action, often portraying teachers and their federations as "punishing Ontario students" (Caplan, 2012) and using them as scapegoats in their dispute with the provincial government.

Founded in 1917 and originally known as the Alberta Teacher's Alliance, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA, 2005), like most other teacher organizations, initially evolved in response to substandard working conditions imposed by local school boards (ATA, 2005). Now representing all of the provinces over 40,000 teachers and school administrators, the ATA has evolved as a teacher organization to encompass a professional agenda that focuses on partnerships, research, and member engagement (Osmond-Johnson, 2015). Moreover, the ATA has emerged as a well-respected advocate for improved public education on a broad scale, despite (and perhaps even as a result of) a system of governance in the 1990s that placed control of education firmly in the hands of the formal legislature (Bascia, 2008). Thus, when Alberta Education (the province's ministry of education) held public consultations on education reform, the ATA sponsored its own roundtable discussion panels throughout the province and released its own report, *Challenging the View*, which portrayed education as an investment rather than an expense. The ATA also attempted to fill many of the substantive gaps resulting from the decimated educational infrastructure, particularly in the area of professional development (Bascia, 2008; Flower & Booi, 1999). It was only in 2002, after the provincial government repeatedly refused to reconsider its financial stance, the ATA finally resorted to trade union tactics, coordinating a series of strikes across one third of the province's school districts and involving nearly 15,000 teachers (Booi, 2007; Raston, 2003).

The break in the tension, however, did not really occur until 2007, after Ed Stelmach had taken over as Premier following Klein's resignation in late 2006. In that year, the ATA and the Premier reached a deal to resolve the issue of the unfunded liability pension plan in exchange for a five-year formally negotiated contract (Bruseker, 2007). A memorandum of understanding was signed in November and three months later, by the January 31<sup>st</sup> deadline, all 62 school boards had ratified agreements and 97% of teachers had voted in favour (Brusker, 2007). In the years that followed, the ATA continued to work with the government on several fronts, including collaborating on new directions for inclusive education and sitting on the steering committee for new Minister Ed Hancock's Inspiring Education project, which was struck in 2009 and tasked with carving out a framework for the future of educational change in Alberta.

While some might be critical of the ATA's willingness to work with the government during this time, viewing their lack of militancy and collective action as weak and unorganized, Raston (2003) contends that, "organizationally, this was a savvy decision that helped the ATA emerge from the Klein Revolution with minimal damage" (p. 150). Moreover, both Raston (2003) and Bascia (2008) suggest that the ATA's unwillingness to deliberately antagonize the government was strategic; the ATA assessed the political climate and, knowing the conditions were unfavourable, "chose to survive the Klein Revolution by avoiding full confrontation with the government" (Raston, 2003, p. 150) and wait until the timing was right and the public was ripe for change.

At the time of data collection, however, education in Alberta was once again in a state of flux after the Conservatives implemented an imposed contract in May of 2013 (CBC, 2013). Moreover, a joint committee examining teacher workload had just been struck and was beginning to conduct its work. In September of 2013, the Minister also created the Task Force for Teaching Excellence whose mandate was to work out possible policies and implementation plans for the recommendations laid out in the final report of Inspiring Education (ATA, 2013). It is this context of challenging political times and strong professional unionism that framed discussions with members of the ATA and set the stage for the discourses of professionalism espoused in this case.

### **Findings: The Politics of Professionalism**

As noted in the literature review, teacher unions have had a difficult time establishing themselves as valid policy actors and educational reformers (Bascia, 2003; 2005; Lipman, 2011; Murphy, 1990; Poole, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Swalwell & Schweber, 2013). Struggling to work with the small space that has typically been afforded to them amidst the recent neoliberalizing of education, teacher unions have been criticized, demonized, and demoralized by the media and researchers alike who have accused them of being concerned only with bread and butter issues of salary and benefits and shamefully putting the needs of teachers ahead of the needs of students. Mangu-Ward (2011), for instance, described union leaders as cartoon super villains and immovable roadblocks to improving education and Brimelow (2003) referred to them as "the worm in the apple." Lieberman (1997) and Moe (2007; 2011) are also prominent critics of teacher unions; with Lieberman accusing teacher unions of being the single greatest obstacle to educational reform in America and Moe (2007) stating, "Teachers don't join unions to promote the best interests of children. They join unions to promote their own interests" (p. 80). Indeed, the mantra of a significant portion of the existing teacher union literature is that "teachers and their unions must be told what to do because, left to their own devices, they will cut a swath of destruction through students, because they are lazy, incompetent, and abusive" (Goldstein, 2011, p. 557).

The two unions in this study, however, stand in stark comparison to the negative portrayal of teacher unions as foreboding and selfish organizations so commonly found in much of the literature that explores their work. Rather, like the unions in Bangs and Frost (2012) and the subject associations in Hilferty (2004), ETFO and the ATA both embody many aspects of Kerchner and Koppich's (1993) notion of professional unionism, sharing a focus on member engagement and professional development that was highly valued by the participants in this study. More specifically, in response to increasing demands for teacher quality amidst fewer government resources, these organizations pride themselves on providing opportunities for

member engagement in a variety of professional learning and leadership programs.

For instance, ETFO provides its members with access to a variety of professional development seminars, conferences, workshops and programs that engage members in shared learning, teacher leadership, and teacher action research. Members are also encouraged to become active in a number of local and provincial committees that deal with such diverse topics as Collective Bargaining, Professional Development, Anti-Racist Education, and International Assistance. Moreover, in keeping with the primary cause of its female predecessor, ETFO maintains a strong focus on equity and women's issues, with specialized professional development programs, conferences, and committees solely dedicated to female teachers, who comprise over 80% of their membership.

Likewise, the ATA has also continued to heavily invest in professional learning opportunities for its members. With a strong focus on member engagement, the ATA holds an annual teacher convention for all the province's teachers, organizes a host of specialist council conferences, runs mentoring programs for beginning teachers and administrators, and hosts online webinars and school-based workshops. In one of its most recent ventures, the ATA has developed an international partnership with Finland where teachers and students' participate in short-term exchanges where they collaborate on mutual learning focused around teaching and learning at the classroom level. ATA members also have many opportunities to engage in teacher leadership through participation in a variety of provincial and local committees and programs. Some of these committees, such as the Economic Policy Committee (EPC), focus on bargaining and teaching conditions while others, such as the Convention Committee and the Instructors Corps, afford members the opportunity to organize and deliver professional development workshops for other teachers.

Describing their associations as "instrumental in facilitating professional growth" (ON1) and "celebrating teacher identities as professionals" (AB12), it was clearly evident that participation in such activities impacted the discourses of participants in this study, in addition to providing support for the enactment of such discourses. By and large, members in both cases viewed teacher professionalism as broadly encompassing roles as learners, mentors, advocates, and collaborators. Self-directed learning opportunities, being respected as autonomous professionals, and engaging in the teacher association were viewed as paramount to professionalism, and members from both associations largely embodied these ideals in their own professional work life, engaging in and seeking out such opportunities on a regular and ongoing basis. In this way then, the ATA and ETFO both served to promote and sustain the promotion of democratic discourses of teacher professionalism amongst their most active members and, in doing so, strengthened capacity for the ongoing development of activist teaching professions (Sachs, 2003) in their respective contexts.

However, while democratic discourses were evident in both cases, there were slight differences between the cases that may reflect the distinct priorities of each organization with respect to professional learning and collaboration. For instance, as evidenced by its partnership with Finland, the ATA focuses heavily on the networking aspect of teacher professionalism. This not only allows members to "see the world from a different viewpoint" (AB5) and "get a better picture of the direction that government is taking on policy" (AB7), it also provides them with opportunities to build their own professional network, which often presents new occasions to enact various aspects of democratic professionalism. While ETFO is involved in a number of collaborative projects, networking was not as strong a component in the discourses of its members, being only briefly mentioned by one participant.

On a similar note, both the ATA and ETFO engage their membership in the political side of teacher unionism, providing an outlet for advocacy and activism and inserting the voice of teachers into the larger context of schooling. Reminding teachers that their voice is “just as valid as anybody else’s voice” (AB5), engagement in such activities has also helped shape the discourses espoused and enacted by the union active teachers in this study, particularly with respect to discourses around the teacher as autonomous expert and the importance of collectively taking a stand as active members of teacher associations. Members from both organizations positioned teachers as “having a voice for students from a position of knowledge and authority” (AB5) and being the agents of change, influencing the policy arena and advocating for quality environments for teaching and learning. Rather than “executing the innovations of others” (van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001, p. 140), teachers were portrayed as “researchers and creators of knowledge” (ON7) on issues related to all areas of educational reform including student learning, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and the professional development of teachers.

Nonetheless, democratic discourses around the teacher as advocate and social activist were more strongly espoused by ATA members than members of ETFO. For instance, while a number of ETFO members talked about “teachers as advocates for social change” (ON7), this was primarily within the context of taking part in protests and other forms of labour action. On the contrary, for ATA participants, the notion of strikes, withdrawal of services, and political marches was all but absent from their discourses. Rather, advocacy and activism amongst ATA members was more about “indicating to the public what the job of teaching is about” (AB4) through proactive political action that opens a dialogue between teachers, the ATA, government, and the public regarding what constitutes the best conditions for teaching and learning.

While no direct correlation can be firmly established, I propose that this distinction may be related to the specific political tactics employed by each organization. Tending to focus more on establishing a research base for its position than it does on active protests, the ATA has worked to develop a vision for the future of education in Alberta that acknowledges the need for thoughtful and careful educational change (see ATA, 2012). Within this context the ATA has become an advocate for public education in the province of Alberta and has been very successful in swaying the public discourse in support of teachers. For instance, following the release of *Challenging the View*, in 1995 the ATA opened the Public Education Action Centre and unveiled the “Public Education Works” slogan, both intended to inform the public of the successes of public education and reframe the discourse from “spending cuts to re-investment” (Raston, 2003, p. 141).

On the other hand, while it employs many tenets of professional unionism, ETFO has tended to rely more heavily on union tactics during times of discord. Within this context, media outlets have portrayed teacher organizations in Ontario as advocates for teachers more so than advocates for education, which, according to some participants, had stymied efforts to swing the public discourse or the reform agendas of governments. For instance, while not the case for all members in this study, some ETFO participants commented that they no longer told people they were teachers, as they did not want to deal with the backlash from people who “want to unload and vent about issues and problems” (ON8). The ATA members in the study, by contrast, did not report being as profoundly impacted by negative public discourses. While some members did speak to the unfavorable manner in which the ATA was sometimes portrayed by the government and in the media, the comments lacked the sense of urgency and despair evident in the discourses of some ETFO members who lamented a similar situation. For instance, while a

few ATA members were fearful that their association work might be used “punitively if you’re trying to move into leadership” (AB4), no ATA member reported being hesitant to tell people what they did for a living.

Thus, the kinds of professional activities members are engaged in and the tactics used during disputes with government appear to have profoundly shaped the views of the ATA and ETFO members who participated in this study. As such, while both organizations share a commitment to professional development, member engagement, and advocacy work, combined with the specificities of their individual approaches, ETFO and the ATA have indeed promoted and supported the development and enactment of democratic discourses of teacher professionalism amongst their most active members, albeit to varying degrees and along somewhat distinct lines.

That being said, a number of factors have contributed to the evolution of policy contexts that are distinct in each location, influencing the work of each federation in particular ways. For instance, as noted earlier, at the time of this study, the Conservative party of Alberta had been in power for over 40 years, and the relationship between the ATA and the Alberta government had been relatively stable. Moreover, even in times of strife, the ATA has often opted to continue to collaborate with government and work within whatever discursive arenas they could to continue to constructively insert the voice of teachers into the larger policy conversation (Bascia, 2008). Within this context, although there have been times where the ATA and the government have come to loggerheads, a prevailing discourse of mutual trust and working together had largely dominated the educational landscape for much of the last 20 years leading into this study (Bascia & Osmond, 2012).

In contrast, three different political parties have governed Ontario since 1990: the NDP, the PC party, and most recently the Liberals. Coupled with the much larger size of the Ministry, establishing solid relationships built on trust with the ruling party has historically been more challenging for ETFO (MacLellan, 2009). In this vein, the prevailing discursive context in Ontario over the past 20 years could be more accurately described as swinging back and forth between one of mutual understanding and collaboration (Campbell, Osmond-Johnson, Lieberman, & Sohn, 2017) and one of hostility and distrust (see MacLellan, 2009; Sattler, 2012).

Further to this, while the ATA is the only teacher association in Alberta, ETFO is one of four federations in Ontario. As Stevenson and Bascia (2013) point out, “in a multi-union situation unions have to look ‘two ways’” (p. 15): not only must they be engaged in a relationship with their employer, they “must also make an assessment of their own actions relative to the actions of other unions” (p. 15). Hence, the single union context in Alberta has situated the ATA as one strong voice for teachers whereas ETFO’s advocacy work has been sometimes impacted by a lack of cohesiveness within its multi-union context. For instance, in the case of Bill 115, OECTA agreed to a deal with the government at the onset, setting a precedent for the other federations to follow suit. Not happy with the deal, ETFO and OSSTF held out and withdrew extracurricular services in protest. Later, when government rescinded the bill, OSSTF lifted their ban, leaving ETFO as the lone federation standing firm.

Like the varied approaches and priorities of teacher organizations, policy contexts also contributed to differences in participant discourses around teacher professionalism. For instance, the establishment of the Ontario College of Teachers, which sets professional standards and handles teacher discipline, was confusing for some ETFO members, who struggled to understand the role of their “union” in light of this external regulatory organization. In contrast, in Alberta, while Alberta Education is involved in the teacher certification process, it is the ATA who deals with matters of discipline and sets the standards for professional practice

and ethical conduct of teachers. There is no external college of teachers or OCT equivalent, and the ATA stands as the one “professional association” for the province’s teachers.

As noted earlier, the policy structure around the work of administrators is also unique to each context. In Alberta, teaching is a unified profession, and the ATA represents both teachers and school administrators. While tensions between teachers and administrators were noted by some ATA members as impacting their ability to enact democratic discourse of teacher professionalism, this theme was much more apparent in the ETFO data, where participants talked, sometimes at great length, about the “us vs. them” (ON7) discourse that has seeped into some schools since principals and vice principals were moved into management positions. In this vein a number of ETFO participants reflected that top-down administrative styles and principals who were “mouthpieces for the board” (ON7) limited their professionalism by portraying their ETFO work as “a waste of time” (ON8), creating a clear dichotomy between those who want to become school administrators and those who want to be active in their teacher federation.

While ATA members acknowledged the presence of limiting factors within Alberta’s policy context, it was workload issues that were perceived as having the largest impact on democratic professionalism. Simply finding the time amongst the barrage of initiatives and ever-increasing demands on teachers was a challenge for most participants and seemed to trump other policy issues like the recent imposed contract. By contrast, ETFO members described the limitations of the policy environment and the discourses within with an unparalleled urgency. Participants voiced concerns over what they perceived as deliberate attempts on the part of government to scapegoat teachers and “throw every piece of crap” (ON2) at them in an attempt to exert more control over teachers and alter the scope of the work of the federation to highlight their union function and decrease their professional purview. In this way, ETFO members seemed to have been exposed to a policy environment that was much more typical of the traditional “paralysis perspective” (Johnson, 2004, p. 34) of unions than their ATA counterparts and, in turn, espoused a deeper mistrust of both government and the public in terms of the value placed on teachers and, by extension, their teacher associations.

Regardless of the presence of competing discourses that served to constrain and limit the enactment of democratic professionalism, all members of both organizations were engaging in professional learning, advocacy, and collaboration well beyond their own classrooms and even their own schools, a function of their work with their teacher organization and their own personal agency. These participants specifically noted that they innately possessed an inner drive to contribute to education on a broader scale, and one Ontario participant posited, “It’s the way I was hatched” (ON9). Putting this agency into action, these particular members engage in a host of self-driven, individual advocacy work outside of their teacher organization. Such work included writing educational blogs, creating a professional network on Twitter, publishing articles and books on critical educational issues, and participating in public advocacy groups around educational reform.

Acknowledging Mead’s notion of “sociality” (as cited in Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), however, also means one cannot discount the impact of the discourses within the broader policy environment on participants’ sense of agency. In this vein, some members from both the ATA and ETFO framed current discourses within their provincial educational landscape as demonstrating the importance of being activists and advocates and, as one ATA member noted, spurs them on “in terms of trying to educate and inform” (AB5) the public and the government about the advocacy work of teachers.

It is also noteworthy, that when compared to the relative percentages of males and females in each sample, ETFO women were much more vocal about their agency than ATA women. One possible explanation for this is the gendered history of ETFO, which has fostered a legacy of programs and services designed to specifically engage the female membership in substantive areas of federation work. With almost 80% of its membership identifying as female, the ATA has a similar gender representation amongst its members, yet there are no targeted women's programs. It goes beyond the data in this study to establish a firm link between the agency of female members and organizational commitment to their engagement; however, this is an area for future exploration.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have illustrated the dynamic ways in which teacher agency, engagement in teacher associations, and the larger policy environment work in tandem to shape discourses of teacher professionalism amongst union active teachers. Drawing on data from two cases, I have also demonstrated the distinct manner in which such forces serve to influence notions of teacher professionalism and the work of teachers in particular milieus and for certain individuals.

Referencing Foucault's notions of discourse and power, various researchers recognize discourses of professionalism as sites of ideological struggle as stakeholders with power differentials compete over which discourses emerge as the dominant ideals of the profession (Hilferty, 2004; McClelland, 1990). Like Hilferty's (2004) study in Australia, data presented in this paper demonstrate that teachers and their teacher organizations can exert varying degrees of influence over the discourses of teacher professionalism that emerge in particular contexts and for particular individuals. In particular, the data suggest that the manner in which teacher associations serve as a platform for the promotion of discourses of professionalism is impacted by the extent to which they prioritize professional aspects over union functions. While the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario has a strong professional focus, within Ontario's multi-union context, it has historically employed traditional union tactics more so than the Alberta Teachers' Association. The ATA also appears to have been more successful in their bid to swing the public discourse in support of teachers and their association, providing the Association with a strong basis upon which to collaborate with government as valued contributors to educational improvement in the province. This has allowed the ATA to also impact the discourses of professionalism in the greater policy environment in a substantial manner, retaining control over teacher discipline and continuing to set the standards for professional conduct and expectations. Within these diverse political and organizational contexts, participants exhibited nuanced understandings of both their professionalism and their agency.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant to the staff and leadership of teacher organizations and ministries of education who are genuinely interested in promoting sustainable educational change that acknowledges the autonomy and discretionary knowledge of teachers. Espousing discourses of the teacher as technician (Codd, 2005) and implementer (van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001), teacher voice is often missing from the policy arena (Bangs & Frost, 2012). In this study, however, teacher activism was alive and well, a manifestation of democratic discourses of teacher professionalism that value the contributions of teachers and acknowledge the diverse work roles teachers take on in the broader context of schooling. Moreover, such discourses were more prevalent when there was an underlying

commitment on the part of the teacher unions and government to collectively work towards developing a shared vision of what it means to be a professional teacher and improving the quality of education. In this vein, teacher associations and ministries of education would do well to re-consider the nature of their relationship. Finding common ground and limiting adversarial tactics could go a long way in developing sustainable educational reform that have significant impacts on teaching and learning.

Like all research, however, this study has its limitations. First and foremost, being qualitative in nature, the findings are not readily generalizable and do not establish causal relationships. Drawing upon a small number of individuals from each organization, the study is by no means an exhaustive representation of all the discourses of professionalism present in either context. It is even arguable that the teacher organizations within this study are not representative of typical teacher unions and, as such, are not representative of the wider organizational context. Nevertheless, the data do provide plausible arguments that provide insight into the complex and fragile nature of discourse of professionalism and the influences that shape them.

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