

**SUPPORTING DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM:
THE CASE OF THE ALBERTA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION**

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This paper explores understandings related to teacher professionalism amongst a sample of highly engaged members of the Alberta Teacher's Association (ATA). Highlighting the many ways in which the Association supported members in their bid to embody roles as leaders, learners, advocates, and policy actors, I argue that the ATA serves as a platform for the development of teacher leaders and advocates who aim to improve the quality of education on a broader scale through their work both inside and outside the classroom.

Introduction

In spite of claims that teachers are the most important in-school influence on student achievement (RAND, 2012), the role of teachers within the context of change is often relegated to “executing the innovations of others” (van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001, p.140), rather than contributing to the innovations themselves. Moreover, much of the planning, research, and development of educational policy follows the technical-rational approach (Datnow & Park, 2009) where policy making is largely conceived of as the purview of official legislators and politicians, situating teachers on the “far end of educational reform” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, p. 1).

This particular policy environment has become even more prominent in education over the past thirty years as market-economies and right-wing political agendas have increasingly become the primary drivers of educational reform around the globe (Ball, 2003; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Verger & Altinyelkin, 2012). Teachers are seen as “functionaries rather than

professionals” (Codd, 2005, p. 201) amidst an onslaught of accountability and austerity measures promoted as bolstering student achievement through the creation of competitive educational markets.

Within these constraining circumstances, however, some teachers have persevered to overcome limited ideas about the work of teachers and teacher leaders by arguing that teacher professionalism and teachers’ role in educational change extends beyond the four walls of any one classroom. To this end, many have become involved in reform minded teacher organizations that represent “teachers’ aspirations for a powerful and participatory form of professionalism that asserts practitioner rights in educational policy-making” (Hilferty, 2004, p. 214). This involvement may be at the local level or on a larger scale and can include partaking in a wide variety of activities ranging from committee work and participating in protests to seeking election and taking on executive roles within the organization. Engagement in such social activities constitutes a significant sphere of influence on the debate around teacher professionalism, as teachers are exposed to organizational conversations about the roles of teachers through both the manner in which the union engages in the educational labour process itself and the kinds of professional learning and advocacy opportunities they make available to their members.

Drawing on data from a larger doctoral study, this paper highlights the many ways in which the Alberta Teachers’ Association has supported members in their bid to embody roles as leaders, learners, advocates, and policy actors. More specifically, I argue that, with it’s commitment to networking and collaboration, the ATA serves as a platform for the development of broader notions of teacher professionalism amongst its most active members, who are aiming to improve the quality of education through their work both inside and outside the classroom.

What is Discourse?

Language and social reality are intrinsically bound together in both mutually reinforcing and offsetting ways. Moreover, 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 (Hall, 2001). Hence, in this study I define discourse as socially constructed representations and ways of thinking about particular concepts and situations. However, discourse does not occur within a vacuum; rather it takes shape within a highly politicized arena of socialization where multiple and varied practices play a significant role in the maintenance of particular power structures and the cultures that support them (Hilferty, 2004). In this way discourse does more than describe or explain what may be real; discourse contributes to the creation of a particular reality (Thomas, 2005) by legitimizing the rules of engagement as to who can speak, when they can speak, and with what authority (Ball, 1990).

Within the existing literature, however, very few authors capture the dynamic socio-political interactions that impact understandings of teacher professionalism. Rather, predominant descriptions of teacher professionalism are typically restricted to work related to the classroom and the teacher as an object of reform, often represented as simplistic lists of standardized competencies that include references to such patronizing notions as proper dress and decorum. Even Sockett (1993) and Hoyle (1974), who both speak of teachers' wider role in educational decision making, orient professionalism as a static state rather than a process of meaning-making.

Hilferty's (2004, 2008) work on teacher professionalism, however, positions teacher professionalism as being "constantly defined and redefined through educational theory, practice, and policy" (Hilferty, 2008, p.161). Moreover, Hilferty (2004) specifically draws a distinction

between traditional notions of professionalism that are primarily concerned with the “quality and character of teacher’s work” and teacher professionalism as a “discourse of power,” in which teachers attempt to influence the quality and character of their work on their own accord. To this end, this study recognizes professionalism as a site of ideological struggle where stakeholders with power differentials compete over which framing emerges as the dominant ideals of the profession. Further to this, drawing on the typologies presented in Sachs (2003), the study situates teacher professionalism within both managerial framings (those that limit teacher roles in educational policy to simple implementers and objects of change) and democratic framings (those that broadly view the work of teachers as including roles as teacher leaders, advocates, and change agents). The tensions between these two often-juxtaposed notions of teacher professionalism are further described below.

Teacher Organizations Neoliberalism, and Discourses of Professionalism

For much of the history of the teaching profession, government involvement in teacher professionalism was somewhat distanced (Day, 2002). Management of teachers was by indirect rule and, while control of the profession still ultimately rested with the state, teachers were subtly co-opted through decentralization and devolution (Lawn & Ozga, 1986). According to Lawn and Ozga (1986), however, beginning in the late 1980s, the locus of control shifted and management of teaching became much more direct as governments began to move forward with right-wing, neo-liberal reform agendas. In the United States, this marketization arguably began in 1983 with the release of the well-known document *A Nation at Risk* (Ravitch, 2010). Claiming that the education system was no longer preparing citizens for the real world, the report called for a sweeping overhaul of educational standards and reframed debates regarding educational policy,

setting into motion a chain reaction of top-down educational reforms aimed at re-establishing America's place as a global leader. Becoming federal law in 2002, one of the most significant of these reforms has been the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. Requiring states to adhere to stringent accountability standards, NCLB has resulted in the creation of state imposed policies that include performance pay, new teacher evaluation procedures, rigid testing and reporting, adequate yearly progress targets, penalties for failing schools, and government mandated professional development (Apple, 2006; Jaiani & Whitford, 2011; Murphy, 2008). According to Apple (2006), these reforms continued "an established tradition of the conservative production of discourse that incorporates progressive language, while simultaneously advancing key elements of the neoliberal and neoconservative agendas" (p. 90).

Similar conditions have also been experienced in England where external school inspections, merit pay, published league tables, and standardized tests as a means to judge teachers' performance have all been imposed as part of a reform agenda that, like in the United States, purports to focus on improving student achievement (Carter, Stevenson, & Passy, 2010; Day, 2002). Moreover, Day (2002) discussed what he refers to as "naming and shaming" (p. 680) 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 argued that these reforms have established a system that "rewards those who successfully comply with government directives and reach government targets and punishes those who do not" (p. 678).

While Canadian educational reform policies have not employed the "blame and shame" methods described in England and the United States, the literature shows that other aspects of the neoliberal agenda have been adopted in much of the country. Beginning in the 1990s, most

provincial governments began downsizing many areas of the public sector. In education, this was primarily achieved through reductions in the number of school boards and the centralization of decision-making (Fleming, 1997; Galway 2012; Osmond, 2008). In line with this, provincial governments in some provinces unilaterally mandated significant policy reforms regarding curriculum, accountability and testing, teacher working conditions, and teacher professional development (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2007a).

This was particularly the mantra of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein who led the Conservative Party of Alberta from 1992 through to 2006. Preoccupied with debt from the previous decade, severe cutbacks in government spending and the downsizing of the public enterprise quickly became the norm as the government went about reinventing itself along entrepreneurial lines (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2007b). By 1993, this “hard right turn” (Jeffrey, 1999) was particularly gruelling for education with the release of *Meeting the Challenge*, a three year business plan for education which slashed the education budget by over a quarter of a billion dollars and stripped boards of their ability to control funding (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2007b; Taylor, 2001). Throughout the remainder of the 1990s, other imposed reforms in Alberta included a reduction in the number of school boards by half, a 5% salary roll back for teachers, the launch of the province’s first charter schools, and the introduction of standardized curriculum and provincial student testing (Barnetson, 2010). According to Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson (2007b), “restructuring in education had begun to take place within a government discourse that predominantly emphasized accountability and choice” (p. 34).

Within these neoliberal contexts, 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. Brennan (as cited

in Sachs, 2003) referred to such framings as “managerial professionalism” where the discretion and classroom expertise of teachers has been exchanged for teacher-proof curricula, narrow accountability measures, and standardized teacher competencies. Ball (2003) argued that the conditions created by such conceptions are more likely to diminish teachers’ capacity to raise standards than increase effectiveness as teachers become “ontologically insecure” (p. 220).

A number of academics, however, have positioned the work of teachers as extending beyond the classroom and situate teachers’ role in education within the broader context of schooling. Sockett (1993), for instance, stated,

Professionalism requires that we go beyond the classroom performance or classroom activity as descriptors of teaching acts to the complete and complex role a teacher fulfills. Public education needs teachers who are able to not only shine in the categories mentioned within the classroom but are also able to undertake the demands of partnership with other professionals, of collaborative leadership, and of a wider role within the school. (p. 8)

Likewise, Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) believed that teacher professionalism should encompass engagement in collaborative cultures and self-directed professional learning rather than compliance with the “endless change demanded by others” (p. 21). Focusing more on the aims of education and educational policy, Sachs (2003) additionally re-defined teacher professionalism with her notion of “transformative professionalism,” which positions teachers as broadly contributing to the quality of education; they advocate for equitable policies that challenge the status quo, their purview is extended to include debates over the purposes of schooling, and their success is judged on more than students’ performance on standardized tests. Such frameworks promote what Sachs (2003) refers to as “democratic” understandings of professionalism. Here, the line between those at the top and those at the bottom are blurred, and teachers are encouraged to “contribute actively to the promotion of educational reform and wider societal change” (Webb et al., 2004, p. 87).

Enacting such understandings against the backdrop of narrow ideas around the work of teachers, however, is a challenging and risky endeavour. To that end, many teachers have done so through active participation in teacher organizations, where alternatives to neoliberal conceptions of teacher professionalism are supported through networking and collective strength. That being said, teacher organizations around the globe have not always fit easily into the educational landscape (Bascia, 2005; Bascia & Osmond, 2012). Operating in a policy context characterized by mandates, fiscal constraint, accountability measures, and an increased state role in educational decision-making has often forced teacher organizations to resort to traditional tactics of adversarial collective bargaining and labour action (Bascia, 2003).

Bascia (2009) also argued that, while much of the work of teacher organizations may be hidden behind anti-union rhetoric, such organizations fulfil necessary roles in education by functioning as a balance to short sighted government initiatives, providing critical feedback on the implementation of educational policies and acting as test-beds for new curriculum and professional development programs. Johnson (2004) referred to this as the “possibilities” perspective, which sees the work of teacher organizations as progressive rather than restrictive and as aiming to improve schools rather than destroy them. Here, a significantly different picture of teacher organizations is presented, one that portrays them as having the capability to engage teachers in myriad professional growth experiences and advocacy work. In this way, teacher organizations can act as a conduit for the promotion and enactment of new, broader framings of teacher professionalism. Mockler (2005), for instance, suggested that bodies that regulate teaching could significantly impact the profession through “pathways for professional growth and development and the adoption of a supporting stance for the emergence of a transformative teaching profession” (p. 739). Likewise, Bascia (1997) commented that involvement in teacher

organizations “offers teachers opportunities to participate in curricular and organizational development activities as well as access to decision-making, information, and resources” (p. 70), which, in turn, provide the foundation for other leadership and advocacy work.

Carving a path that operates in contrast to the stereotypical view of teacher organizations as roadblocks to reform on educational quality, innovative teacher organizations like those described above are contributing to the development of a “tapestry” where “educational improvement is understood as requiring multiple efforts in many aspects of educational practice by many reform players” (Bascia, 2003, p. 4). Within this tapestry, teacher organizations and their members are altering the balance of professionalism in significant and important ways. As will be explored further in the remainder of this paper, in Alberta, the ATA has intentionally and purposefully worked towards establishing itself not as an advocate for teachers, but as advocates for public education. This, in turn, has created a public atmosphere that is highly supportive of both teachers and the ATA, providing additional support for the creation of a broad frame that conceives of the work of teachers as going beyond the walls of any one classroom and extending into substantive issues of educational policy and politics.

Methodology

This paper draws on data from a comparative case study of two Canadian teacher organizations, The Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario (ETFEO) and the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA). This particular paper, however, focuses solely on the case of the ATA and specifically explores the manner in which the ATA facilitated and supported the evolution of democratic understandings of professionalism amongst its most active members. The ATA was invited to participate because it has a particularly long history of advocacy work

and political engagement, and a strong focus on supporting the professional growth of teachers—conditions that are associated with the construction of democratic understandings of professionalism (Sachs, 2003; Hilferty 2004). Information about the study was provided at a provincial teacher leadership event held by the ATA in the summer of 2013, where information letters describing the purpose and scope of the study were available for interested attendees.

In total, 13 participants from the ATA volunteered to be a part of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants and ranged from approximately 30 minutes to one hour in duration. Interviews probed members' understandings of teacher professionalism, the nature of their involvement in the ATA, the roles and boundaries of the work of teachers, and the elements that influence and shape the enactment of such understandings. Interviews were audiotaped with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim. Participant checks were used to ensure accuracy.

Interview data revealed that participant 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 varied from almost thirty years to just over ten. Seven had been active for their whole teaching career, while the remaining six became more involved a little later, their association work spanning about half of their teaching career. Six members were currently serving on local executive council, with one member having previously served on provincial executive council. Another member was the president of a provincial specialist council. The remaining six members were currently volunteering on various local and provincial committees. All members had myriad experiences with the Association in addition to their current work, previously serving on a number of other committees in a variety of capacities,

attending and presenting at various conferences and professional development seminars, and being involved a various political and professional association initiatives at both the local and provincial level.

Data analysis was inductive in its approach and utilized the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with open coding. 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 particular I paid attention to the manner in which each participant understood professionalism and the links they forged between their association work and their professionalism.

Context of the Study: The Alberta Teachers' Association

Founded in 1917 and originally known as the Alberta Teacher's Alliance, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), like most other teacher organizations, initially evolved in response to substandard working conditions imposed by local school boards. Now representing all of the province's over 40,000 teachers and school administrators, the ATA's dedication to achieving high standards of working conditions for its members has not wavered. However, in almost 100 years since its inauguration, the ATA has evolved as a teacher organization to encompass a professional agenda that focuses on partnerships, research, and member engagement (Bascia & Osmond, 2013). 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

government in the 1990s that placed control of education firmly in the hands of the formal legislature (Bascia, 2008).

Rather than respond to the so-called crisis in education with traditional union tactics, the ATA viewed the charged political climate of the 1990s as an opportunity to assert its voice in the educational landscape and become a strong advocate for public education on a different scale (Raston, 2003). 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 in educational practice 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, that 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, didn't 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). 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 of Education 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. The ATA also partnered

with the government and other stakeholders on the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), a teacher-led program with the goal of improving education through localized, action research projects.

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 (“Province to Legislate,” 2013). Moreover, 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*. While the ATA had been an integral component in *Inspiring Education*, they were excluded from the task force, creating new tensions between the association and the government.

Regardless of the political climate or the nature of their relationship with the government, however, over the years the ATA has 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 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 Association developed an international partnership with Finland where teachers and students participant in short-term exchanges to collaborate on mutual learning around teaching and learning at the classroom level.

ATA members also have many opportunities to engage in leadership and advocacy 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. Additional committees focus on misconduct, strategic planning, political engagement, administrator issues and concerns, teacher welfare, and child and youth well being, just to name a few.

Having navigated some tough waters both in the past and in current times, the ATA has emerged in the public sphere as an advocate for progressive educational reform in Alberta. Moreover, through strategic political engagement and the provision of a variety of professional activities for its members, the ATA has directly challenged traditional views around teacher professionalism and the role of teachers in the context of educational change. 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 examination of professionalism detailed in this case.

Views on Professionalism

When asked to define teacher professionalism and the work of teachers, the majority of ATA members espoused understandings that were more democratic (Sachs, 2003) in nature, tending to view teacher professionalism as encompassing the roles of learner, mentor, advocate, and collaborator. Pursuing self-directed learning opportunities, being respected as autonomous professionals, and engaging in the teacher association were viewed as paramount to professionalism and participants largely embodied these ideals in their own professional work lives. As a whole, participants were involved in a dynamic range of professional activities. Five had completed their master's degree and one was pursuing a doctorate. A few had been involved

in curriculum and report card development and others had attended or presented at provincial educational conferences.

For the majority of participants, however, the teacher association served as the platform from which they chose to enact their professionalism, engaging in the broader context of schooling through a variety of association efforts. For some, being active within the ATA had invigorated and renewed their passion for teaching and served as a motivating factor in their desire to advocate for students and teaching profession alike. This was particularly the case for one participant who had a history of local executive work and involvement in specialist councils. She commented, “People ask me why don't I retire, because I have the years to do so, and I say I have found a new passion in getting involved in what's happening within the province” (AB11). On a similar note, another participant with extensive committee work was very passionate about the value of the association and the unique growth opportunities it provided, stating “You get to be part of an organization that celebrates our identities as professionals in different ways and we don't very often get opportunities to celebrate that as educators” (AB12).

In many ways, being a part of the ATA provided an outlet for participants to find their professional voices and critically challenge policies and initiatives that, however well-meaning, were not well-suited to the realities of their classrooms or their schools. For instance, one participant noted how being involved in the association had validated her expertise and reminded her that professional judgment had a place in the broader policy picture:

Being part of the ATA constantly reminds me that I am a professional and that I have the knowledge and wisdom to think for myself and help my students. And when the government and the superintendents and people above me start to say “do this” and “do that,” I can stop and question it because I am a professional, I can think for myself. I work with my students, I know them well, and my voice is just as valid as anybody else's voice and sometimes more so because I work one on one with the kids, I know them much better than a lot of other things that seem to come down the pipes at us. (AB5)

Others commented that amidst the day-to-day hustle and bustle of the classroom, it is easy for teachers to forget that they have a voice. For these teachers, then, the association played an integral role in promoting ideas around the teacher as expert and advocate and providing a foundation to stand upon in their own endeavours. In this vein, ATA members in this study largely enacted their professionalism as a “discourse of power” (Hilferty, 2004), their actions and activities clearly portraying professional teachers as experts, decision makers, and advocates. Their extra-classroom work challenged traditional ideals around what it means to be a professional teacher and they ventured into the policy arena confident and strong.

Participants particularly valued the ATA’s strong commitment to the provision of diverse professional learning opportunities for their members. Participants talked about the Finland Project, Convention, Summer Institute, and a host of other workshops and seminars, viewing such events as “celebrating teacher identities as professionals” (AB12) and heavily supporting their professional growth. One particular participant actually credited her career growth and leadership experiences to her involvement in ATA sponsored PD:

A lot of my leadership experiences I've gotten through being actively involved in the ATA. A lot of my professional growth has come from them, both from attending PD workshops, conferences, curriculum circles, that sort of thing, as well as being involved in the development of curriculum resources, facilitating workshops, putting on presentations myself. Probably 85% of that has come from my involvement through the ATA. I don't think I would be an administrator in my district right now, or a consultant if it weren't for that.
(AB8)

Some remarked that many experiences were opportunities they felt they would not have had otherwise, noting the generous proportion of the ATA’s budget that supports teachers in attending and participating in such events. One participant relayed, “In our building, we have 15 teachers, including myself and the principal who have now travelled to Finland, and those are

opportunities we definitely wouldn't have had without the ATA spearheading and leading those opportunities for us” (AB10).

Perhaps more than anything, however, the learning experiences of ATA members were supported through the various networking opportunities afforded to them by their involvement with the ATA. In particular, members articulated that the ATA expanded their professional networks and increased their sphere of influence through dialogue with leading academics, government officials, and teachers from around the province and, in some cases, the globe. For instance, one participant recalled how becoming PD chair opened him up to a whole new professional community:

When I became PD chair for my local that really allowed me an opportunity to spend more time and effort on ATA events where they brought in world-class speakers like Pasi Sahlberg, Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, and the names go on. I started reading their books and listening to them and blogging about them and, although I started the ball on my own, it's really in large part because of the ATA. (AB6)

For some participants, participating in these new networks had the domino effect of serving as an additional platform from which to insert their voice in the policy arena. As evidenced in the passage below, this held true not only for those in formal executive positions, but also for those who were involved in various committees:

The minister does a reception at the ARA (Annual Representative Assembly) and I've had a chance to talk with him about some of the things that are not ok. So, it also provides opportunities to talk with people at different places and you can kind of get messages across. (AB5)

Hearing and reflecting on the perspectives of their peers and colleagues through committee work and professional learning opportunities also broadened participants' frame of reference in terms of the diversity of teaching and learning conditions across the province, allowing them to view educational issues through a variety of lenses. In this manner, a number of members commented

that they were able to “see society through different eyes” (AB12) and gain better insights into how educational policies play out in the bigger picture:

I get a better idea of the direction that the government is taking on policy. I get a clear sense of ATA policy and probably I know a lot more about issues related to teaching and education in the province because I'm involved in those . . . simply being aware of things that I wouldn't normally have been aware of if I were just a day to day teacher, I show up teach and go home. I really wouldn't be as informed about issues related to education. (AB7)

Consequently, networking through the ATA often created a more acute awareness of the depth and breadth of the circumstances of their peers, which, in turn, fuelled their advocacy work around conditions of teaching and learning.

In summary, as the comments of the ATA members in this study illustrate, working with and participating in various facets of the ATA provided participants with a platform for advocacy work and an opportunity for professional growth, which consequently supported the promotion of democratic discourses of teacher professionalism amongst the majority of the members in this study. In this way then, the ATA served to promote and sustain broader notions of teacher professionalism amongst their most active members. This is further discussed below.

The ATA as a Platform for Professionalism

Although much of the work of teacher organizations has traditionally focused on labour issues, their reach into professional issues is growing. As the case of the ATA demonstrates, teacher organizations are capable of positively contributing to the quality of education through both their foray into educational research and their commitment to providing their members with relevant and engaging professional growth and leadership opportunities. While not all organizations operate in this manner (Bascia, 2000), those that do are providing their members with a platform for the creation of new conversations around what it means to be a professional

teacher (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Building on the portrayals of teacher organizations found in the work of Bascia (1994, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2008, 2009), Johnson (2009), Murray (2004), and Rottman (2011), the ATA is dedicated to the improvement of educational quality and, in times of economic downturn, has stepped up to the plate, developing innovative learning opportunities and teaching resources for their members in the face of reductions to teacher professional development by government.

Further to this, the data presented here highlights the important role that a teacher association can play as a counter-balance to neoliberal agendas that many authors position as aiming to reduce teaching and learning to a series of “paint by number” experiences (see Beck, 2008; Carter, Stevenson, & Passy, 2010; MacBeath, 2012; Ozga, 1995). Rather, in this study, managerial approaches that “work to marginalize teachers from the policy process” (Thomas, 2005, p.48), decompose their work into “auditable competencies and performances” (Connell, 2009, p.220) were challenged by counter-narratives that portrayed teachers as agents and advocates, driven by a desire to “contribute actively to the promotion of educational reform and wider societal change” (Webb et al., 2004, p. 87) in their own classrooms and beyond.

Moreover, the case of the ATA also highlights the important role that teacher organizations can play in the promotion of teachers as change agents. Although many members of the ATA were internally driven to give back to the profession and positively impact teaching and learning for their own students and those around the province, it was clear that participation in their teacher association supported this determination and provided an avenue to put their passion into action. Garnering collective strength from like-minded colleagues and peers as well as staff and elected representatives, the members in this study were drawn to participate in their association because they saw it as a real way to impact change in the broader policy picture.

Rather than standing alone, they drew on the wisdom and support of their fellow members and their executive as they went about voicing their opinions regarding proposed changes to educational policies, working conditions, and structural changes, all while engaging in a variety of professional learning and growth activities.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper highlights an under-represented narrative of teacher professionalism where teachers collectively enact their professionalism as “a discourse of power” (Hilferty, 2004) as they attempt to challenge marginalized views of teachers as professionals and exercise their authority and agency as active participants in the educational policy arena. The findings are timely and actively contribute to the limited body of literature that argues the importance of the work of teacher associations and broad roles of teachers within the policy arena.

The findings presented here 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 actions required of teachers. As the front-line workers in education, teachers are uniquely positioned to garner first-hand insights into “what works” with respect to improving educational quality and student achievement. Pre-occupied with narrow ideas around accountability, however, governments and ministries of education around the globe have continued to attempt to situate teachers on the periphery of educational reform (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). The data presented here, however, suggests that, despite the existence of managerial ideas around teacher professionalism, teachers in this study embodied roles as change agents and policy actors, supported by an association that valued the contributions of teachers and acknowledged the

diverse work roles teachers take on in the broader context of schooling. In this vein, teacher associations and ministries of education may do well to re-consider the nature of their relationship and attempt to collaborate more rather than drawing lines in the sand.

The data in this case also challenges literature that portrays teacher organizations as “immoveable” roadblocks to educational change (Mangu-Ward, 2011) whose sole purpose is to derail educational progress and maintain a status quo of mediocrity. Even in times when they didn't see eye-to-eye with government, the ATA partnered with the provincial government on various projects, illustrating that relations between teachers and government are not necessarily always adversarial in nature.

It must be acknowledged, however, that with its specific aim of uncovering democratic discourses of professionalism, the study concerned itself only with teachers who were active in their association in order to elicit data from those who were more likely to be engaging in the kinds of extra-classroom work supported by such discourses. As such, it cannot be said that the findings are representative of the faction of the membership that is disengaged and not active within the ATA. Future studies might specifically explore the discourses of this particular group to provide teacher organizations with additional data for making their work more relevant to the broader membership and bolstering the engagement and commitment of members who are currently disengaged.

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