

Discourses of Teacher Professionalism: “From Within” and “From Without” or Two Sides of the Same Coin?

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Abstract

Drawing on data from a larger doctoral study, this paper specifically explores influences on the discourses of professionalism amongst a sample of highly engaged teachers within the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO). The study is rooted in the assumption that discourse takes shape within a highly politicized system of socialization where language plays a significant role in the maintenance of particular power structures and the cultures that support them (Hilferty, 2004). Overall, the case suggests that the professionalism discourses of teachers and their unions and those of government are not necessarily as mutually exclusive as they are often presented in the literature.

Keywords; teacher professionalism, teacher federations, discourse analysis

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, right wing political agendas have increasingly become the primary drivers of educational reform around the globe (Apple, 2007; Ball, 2003; Verger & Altinyelkin, 2012). Amidst an onslaught of teacher-proof curricula, narrow accountability measures, standardized teacher competencies, and austerity measures, hegemonic discourses of teacher professionalism have constructed teachers as the implementers and subjects of educational change, rather than valued contributors and educational experts (Ball, 2003; Thomas, 2005).

Within these constraining circumstances, however, some teachers enact alternative discourses of teacher professionalism that conceive teachers’ role in educational change as extending beyond the four walls of their own classrooms. Most easily done as a collective venture, many teachers have become actively involved in reform-minded and proactive teacher unions who deliberately work to secure opportunities for their members to engage in the broader issues of schooling (Bangs & MacBeath, 2012; Bascia, 1997, 2000, 2008, 2009; Bascia & Osmond, 2012; Hilferty 2004, 2008; Kuehn, 2007; Murray, 2004; Naylor, 2005; Rottmann, 2011).

It is against this backdrop that the author engaged in a qualitative case study of the discourses of teacher professionalism amongst union active teachers within the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario (ETFO). The aim of the study was to theorize the factors which have influenced the evolution of discourses of teacher professionalism and illuminate the institutional and historical cultures and structures that are at work. One of four teacher federations in Ontario, ETFO was formed 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). ETFO was specifically chosen for the study because of their long-standing commitment to diverse professional learning (PL) and teacher leadership opportunities. This has instilled a vision of the teaching profession that portrays

teachers as valued pedagogical experts. While this vision was evident in the professionalism discourses of many of the ETFO members in this study, data also indicates that media coverage and government backlash against the work to rule campaigns, political protests, and strike actions that occurred leading up to the study had significantly impacted member discourses as well. These discursive influences were not static, however, nor are they as mutually exclusive as they are often presented in the literature. Rather, as illustrated in this paper, a complex, mutually reinforcing relationship exists between these elements that change over time as teachers, their unions, and governments respond to each other in new and evolving ways. In this way, the paper presents a new lens through which to view the discursive arena around notions of teacher professionalism. These findings are timely considering the increasing influence of deficit discourses of teacher professionalism and actively contribute to the limited body of literature that broadly conceives the work of teacher unions and the roles of teacher leaders within the policy arena.

What is Discourse?

Rooted in a poststructuralist view where language and social reality are intrinsically bound together, discursive perspectives emphasize the social nature of meaning-making (Ball, 1990). Foucault extends this idea, noting that discourse also refers to “what is thought, who can speak, when, and with what authority” (as cited in Hilferty, 2008, p. 241), a function of the power relations inherent in institutional practices and their accompanying social and cultural norms. In this way, discourse contributes to the creation of a particular reality (Thomas, 2005) such that subjects espouse a particular lexicon in response to social and organizational norms and expectations, sustained through the “rules” of a particular discourse. At its very core then, discourse is never neutral (Fairclough, 1989). Rather, discourse is a mechanism of power, often reflecting the values and beliefs of privileged social groups. In other words, ideology perpetuates hegemonic discourses, “which are then accepted by the masses as the natural order” (Orlowski, 2011, p. 44). As Orlowski (2011) points out, however, hegemonic discourses are often covert in nature since elitist groups are in the minority in North America (and most other industrialized nations). In other words, most people are often unaware that hegemony is operating in their lives, a function of the ubiquitous and implicit manner in which such discourses are presented in the public realm.

Not all discourses are hegemonic, however. Rather, As Orlowski (2011) suggests, “discourses can work toward either sustaining unequal relations of power or challenging them” (p. 37). The importance of local resistance to dominant discourses was also noted by Foucault, positioned as an opportunity to stimulate institutional change on both micro and macro scales (as cited in MacDonald, 2006). Indeed, there are factions of society who actively work to challenge hegemonic discourses and the power structures that sustain them - we saw this in both the Occupy and the Idle No More movements (Orlowski, 2015). Consequently, as Sachs (2003) argues, space does exist for the production of counter-hegemonic discourses that serve to challenge dominant ideologies and provide the public with alternative ways of constructing particular issues.

In this vein, Hilferty’s (2004, 2008) work on discourses of teacher professionalism presents power as being embedded in all social processes and, as such, positions discourses of teacher professionalism as being “constantly defined and redefined through educational theory, practice, and policy” (Hilferty, 2008, p.161). Hence, teacher professionalism in this study is conceived as a site of ideological struggle influenced by power and politics that shifts and changes over time as teachers, their unions, and governments respond to each other in new and evolving ways. As discussed further in the paper, the struggle over discursive legitimacy and which discourses find their way into the public sphere has particular significance given the impact of neoliberalism and its effects on the manner in which teacher professionalism has been constructed.

The Politics of Professionalism

Building on McClelland’s (1990) notion of professionalization “from within” and “from without,” much of literature positions discourses of professionalism as both externally imposed as a means of control as well as internally enacted to assert autonomy and contest the power of bureaucracy (Fournier, 1999). Applying this lens to education, governments have attempted to professionalize teaching through formal policies while teachers and their unions have also espoused and enacted their own conceptions of teacher professionalism (Ozga, 1995).

According to Sachs (2003), the dominant discourse in much of the industrialized world constructs a professional teacher as 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) refers to such discourses as “managerial” professionalism. Deficit ideologies typically associated with external professionalization, managerial professionalism is deeply rooted in neoliberalism, a pervasive political agenda that has permeated public policy across much of the industrialized world, often regardless of political stripe. Focused on the corporate principles of competition, productivity, and effectiveness, neoliberal agendas center on increased centralization of control over policy reform and the weakening of unions and their collective bargaining rights as part of a bid to increase the efficiency of the public enterprise (Orlowski, 2015). For teachers (and others working in the public sector), this has created what Apple (2007) has refers to as an audit culture, requiring “the constant production of evidence that you are doing things ‘efficiently’ and in the ‘correct’ way” (p. 7). Indeed, it was this kind of discourse that dominated during the Harris years - the height of neoliberalism in Ontario (MacLellan, 2009).

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), through teacher leadership opportunities and self-directed professional learning experiences. Enacting democratic discourses against a systematic backdrop of managerial conceptions of teachers’ work, however, is a challenging and risky endeavor. To that end, democratic discourses are often positioned as originating from within the profession itself, usually as an expressed rejection of the deficit discourses of incompetence and indolence touted by neoliberalism.

While this study recognizes the existence of diverse discourses of teacher professionalism, it is important to note that discourses of professionalism from within and from without are not necessarily dichotomous or mutually exclusive. Rather, researchers in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, maintain that, while self-regulation is in a state of flux, new professions continue to emerge across various sectors and professionals often retain the ability to influence policy, even if in a more limited capacity (Adams, 2015). Likewise, some sociologists have suggested that liberal states permitted professions as a way of regulating social order amidst increasing globalization of the market enterprise (Evetts, 2003) and exerting “control at a distance through the construction of ‘appropriate’ work identities and conducts” (Fournier, 1999, p. 281). In this sense, regardless of their origin, discourses of professionalism are inscribed within a network of accountability where the professions are both the rulers and the ruled, which inevitably create tension over the particular discourses that make their way into the public sphere. In this sense, discourses of teacher professionalism from within and from without may not necessarily evolve in spite of each other but, rather, they may actually evolve alongside and in relation to each other.

Methodology

Drawing on data from a larger study of discourses of teacher professionalism, this paper specifically highlights the influences on the professionalism discourses of teachers within the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario. As noted earlier, ETFO was initially chosen because of its strong professional agenda. As data analysis unfolded, it also became apparent that the unique organizational and cultural contexts of Ontario education made ETFO an interesting example of the complex relationship that exists between the dynamic forces that shape the discursive arena around notions of teacher professionalism.

Of particular significance to the findings presented here, ETFO was the sole teacher federation in the study to operate in a system characterized by the presence of an external regulatory body for the teaching profession and the removal of school administrators from the teacher federation - factors which were found to significantly impact participant understandings of themselves as professionals.

Participants for the ETFO case were recruited at a provincial teacher leadership event sponsored by ETFO. Interested attendees were provided with information letters describing the purpose and scope of the study and were instructed to contact the researcher directly should they be interested in participating to ensure confidentiality.

In total, eleven ETFO members volunteered to be a part of the study. As outlined in the table below,

participants had partaken in numerous facets of the federation, primarily at the local level. Four were currently serving on local executive councils: two as vice-president, one as secretary, and one as a chief negotiator. The remaining seven participants were serving on a variety of local and provincial committees or were currently school stewards.

Table 1

Demographic Descriptors of Participants

Participant	Role at time of study	Total years of service	Years of ETFO engagement	ETFO involvement
ON1	School Board Consultant	30	16	Workshops/PD, provincial and local level equity committees, PD facilitator, federation rep, local equity rep, local communications officer
ON2	Chief negotiator for local branch	13	13	Standing committee for provincial collective bargaining, union school, AQ courses, provincial level workshops
ON3	Vice-President for local branch	16	15	Local branch executive member (various roles), school steward, workshops/PD, PD facilitator, political protests, strike coordination
ON4	Classroom teacher	31	31	School steward, workshops/PD, conferences
ON5	Classroom teacher	12	6	workshops, school steward, political protests, PD facilitator
ON6	Classroom/Special needs teacher	7	2	School steward, political protests, workshops/PD, local collective bargaining committee
ON7	Classroom teacher	24	10	Workshops/PD, PD facilitator, local committees
ON8	Classroom teacher	10	6	School steward, workshops/PD, conferences
ON9	Classroom teacher	21	9	Workshops/PD, conferences
ON10	Classroom teacher	25	25	School steward, local branch secretary, political protests, workshops/PD, PD facilitator, AQ courses, local committees
ON11	Vice-President for local branch	26	26	School steward, AQ courses, workshops/PD, conference, local committees, local collective bargaining team

All had attended a variety of ETFO sponsored professional learning 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 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. 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, beginning 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, large themes were recoded into smaller subthemes, comparing and contrasting the various ways in which participants framed their views within each particular theme and subtheme.

ETFO and Ontario's Policy Context

Remaining true to the roots of its predecessors, ETFO has become both a political juggernaut and staunch advocate for teacher rights in Ontario; often the first union to launch a pro-active media campaign and the last union standing firm in times of strife. This is perhaps a result of being born into existence during the hostile reign of Conservative Premier Mike Harris, who essentially attempted to de-professionalize teachers through several top-down policy measures including centralized control over curriculum, student assessment, teacher evaluation and certification, and matters of 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 accrediting teacher education programs (Gidney, 1999; 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 (1997), 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 with 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. Likewise, when the government announced a plan for teacher re-certification in 2002 that would require teachers to complete fourteen prescribed PD courses 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 billion in educational funding. Moreover, in 2006 McGuinty provided ETFO with \$7.8 million to expand existing professional learning 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 such as the Putting Students First Act (Bill 115) (2012). 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 (Skorbach, 2012). Corporate 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 students as scapegoats in their beef with the provincial government.

Results: Discourses of Teacher Professionalism and the Work of Teachers

Democratic Discourses

Eight of the 11 ETFO members in this study espoused discourses of teacher professionalism that were more or less rooted in democratic notions of the role of teachers within the broader context of schooling. For such members, engaging in collaborative work, self-directed professional learning, and federation activities added a richness that enabled them to better respond to the diverse needs of their students, while giving back to the profession and supporting the professional growth of their peers. In this sense, being a professional teacher meant being an autonomous learner, exercising professional judgment, collaborating with others, and taking a stand on educational reforms and policies from a position of authority and knowledge.

More specifically, the discourse of the teacher as learner was prominent, with five of the eight describing teacher professionalism as engaging in self-directed learning and seeking out diverse opportunities for professional growth. Emphasis was placed on being aware of current best practices and critically reflecting on and adapting classroom practice in light of new knowledge. For instance, one ETFO member commented, “Obviously there has to be a knowledge base and a learning base and that can’t be static so you need to be continually perfecting your craft” (ON11).

The notion of teachers as educational experts and autonomous decision makers was also particularly evident in the dialogue of three participants. Professional teachers were viewed as possessing the skills and experience to make self-directed decisions as opposed to having others make decisions for them. For one participant, the teacher as decision-maker was about being autonomous in the classroom and making pedagogical decisions that were in the best interest of the students in their own classrooms:

[Professionalism is] this set of skills that say, “I’m the expert”. So, when I’m educating the students that are in my class, I’m the person that works with them day to day, I have the skills necessary and the experience and the knowledge to know what’s best to do for this student in this class at this time. We always seem to want to go to someone who’s written something but have never actually been the frontline teacher in the classroom. So, for me it’s this set of skills that says I’m the expert in this area. (ON3)

In another instance, a participant viewed autonomy and decision-making as encompassing big picture items around self-directed learning and being reflective practitioners:

Well, when I think teacher professionalism, what comes to mind is autonomy... being researchers and creators of knowledge, being able to read critically and do research rather than just passively accepting what we are told is the latest and greatest thing. (ON7)

Related to ideas around the teacher as expert, four participants said that teacher professionalism also included taking an activist role and inserting teacher voice into the educational policy arena. While discourses around such action ranged from simply being a part of the conversation to talk about protests and work-to-rule action, the importance of presenting a counter-narrative to deficit discourses was also evident:

I became certainly quite involved politically, in terms of taking part in protest and then becoming part of a political party and making connections with other union organizations, just to try to make sure that the voice of education and teachers is heard and heard within the proper context, not within the stereotype that’s on the news. (ON1)

For another participant, activism was about “advocating and helping people see what we do and ensuring that the public has faith and confidence in my judgment” (ON5).

Mixed Discourses

The discourses of five participants, however, were more mixed in nature, containing elements of traditional, managerial discourses of teacher professionalism in addition to notions of professionalism that were more strongly akin to broader, democratic discourse of the work of teachers. This created hybrid discourses, further highlighting the complex nature of discourses of professionalism. For instance, while one participant initially began to speak about professionalism in the traditional realm of their work with students and the delivery of curriculum, they went on to note:

Part of understanding how to meet the needs of the student in the classroom is to understand the environment that they are now part of and that we all have to work in. And so, for me, all of the lead-

ership opportunities, the work on committees, both with the federation and through the board and of my own personal interest, is for me to better understand what it is that I'm trying to prepare the child for. And then, when I see that there are areas that need to be improved or could be improved, voicing those issues and being prepared to take on an activist role as well in order to further that vision of what I see education could be and certainly to make sure that we remove any unnecessary barriers for our students. (ON 1)

Hence, for this participant, notions of advocacy and activism were viewed as part of the work teachers do in order to better serve the students they teach.

Moreover, three other participants espoused mixed discourses that were more conservative in nature, with only the slightest traces of democratic professionalism. For instance, one participant's discourse centered on upholding good moral character:

You are always portraying that which are the best qualities you want to see in people; morals, values, socially how you behave, and well as the ethics of you want the best for children in any situation whether it be at your school or your neighbours children or any child out there. (ON10)

Aligning with traditional managerial discourses of professionalism, another commented that professionalism was rooted in being accountable and demonstrating a minimum level of expertise:

The expectation is that you have done a number of educational pieces to get to this point and you are working in the public and there is this expectation that you need to be, on a minimum, demonstrating your knowledge and your professionalism towards children and other educators. (ON2)

Here the line of conversation implied that, rather than granting autonomy, the fact that teachers possess expertise means that their conduct is restricted to that which falls within a particular standard of behavior and expectations. This was certainly the mantra of the neoliberal business model that was brought into Ontario's public education system by the Harris government in the 1990s.

Enacted Discourses and Limiting Factors

Interestingly enough, all ETFO members in this study enacted a discourse of professionalism that embodied democratic ideals of the work of teachers, regardless of the nature of the discourses they espoused. In this vein, although tensions around the extra-classroom work of teachers were evident in the discourses espoused by some ETFO members, democratic discourses of teacher professionalism were very much alive and well in their own professional work lives. They were leaders, mentors, activists, and policy actors, taking a dynamic role in their own professional growth, supporting that of their colleagues, and publically advocating for quality learning environments and improved teaching conditions. Moreover, 10 of the 11 specifically noted that participation in their teachers' association had influenced and reinforced democratic views of professionalism. One participant talked about how ETFO's social justice orientation supported teacher activism and the implementation of critical pedagogy:

Teachers as advocates for social change is perhaps a broader vision than how most people might envision a classroom teacher, but ETFO and other teacher organizations and other unions do a lot of work for anti-poverty and social justice and these sorts of programs and it's all about the pedagogy of liberation, right. This sort of wider, trying to make the world a better place is something that I find very inspiring. (ON7)

Another talked about ways in which ETFO had created awareness of the breadth of issues that affect teaching, acting as a vehicle for exerting a collective voice, which the participant described as being "very empowering to your professional development as well as your professional growth" (ON 1).

Participants also identified a number of discursive factors that they perceived as limiting their teacher professionalism in some manner. For seven participants, these were primarily tied to the overall climate of the larger education policy context within the province, with the recent battle over Bill 115 taking center stage. Of particular significance was the manner in which the media's coverage of the work to rule action had shaped public discourses and framed teachers as out for their own best interests at the expense of students. One participant in particular recalled how frustrated and disappointed she felt when hearing comments like "fire them all and hire a bunch of other people who will do the job" (ON7). Such discourses were seen as disheartening and hurtful, adding salt to the wounds of teachers who were already feeling battered and bruised by the Liberals. The lingering effects of such negativity were so powerful in the lives of two teachers that they reported being apprehensive to even tell people that they were teachers.

It was also evident that policy changes made during the Harris years had left their mark on the discursive landscape and were continuing to shape the policy context and views around teachers and teacher organizations almost 20 years later. In particular, seven participants identified the removal of administrators from the teacher federations as setting up a dichotomy between teachers and administrators that sometimes constrained the ability of teachers to participate in extra-classroom work:

What's limited me is my principal.... I'm old enough that they used to be part of our bargaining unit. So, I was around when that change happened actually and I worked with a principal who was a very strong member of ETFO and then when the changes came in, all of a sudden it was now "us and them" mentality. (ON7)

Consequently, administrators were viewed by these members as being "mouthpieces" for the board and the Ministry, which was perceived as limiting teacher autonomy and the professional judgment of teachers. It was also noted that engaging in federation work sometimes put up a red flag with principals and created an adverse work atmosphere that wasn't conducive to collaboration, teacher leadership, professional learning, or any other aspect of democratic professionalism.

Another participant specifically spoke about the ways in which Harris shifted the discourse around teacher federations from one of "professional association" to one of "union." It was felt that the term union was specifically employed to de-professionalize teachers and portray teachers as typical labourers that could easily be replaced:

We used to be a professional association. Mike Harris changed us all to unions. And I think that was because a union is more of a hardcore sort of thing; union people are punching a clock, they are hourly employees and they are widgets.... So, if we don't have professional knowledge, if we're widgets, I see it going the way of America where we are handed the resources and told its idiot proof and salaries no longer need to be as high and you can get anyone to do it. (ON7)

Changing the terminology also changed the ways in which the general public and even teachers themselves viewed their federations, especially in light of the creation of the OCT, which is touted as the "professional" association for the provinces' teachers.

Yet, in spite of the existence of what was viewed as a sometimes antagonistic and contentious policy environment, these same participants were also hopeful that the worst was over and expressed confidence that, in solidarity, ETFO members could face whatever obstacles were thrown their way: I would like to be optimistic that it's going to settle down a little bit... I mean as long as the union can stick together, we'll be ok. But that would be the key. And that's what the governments' next goal is, is to divide and conquer – the mentality is that if they can scare that fear into us, we'll break. And I think one ETFO's big jobs is to keep the fear mongering at a minimum. (ON2)

Driven by and supported in their work with the federation, they commented that nothing limited their professionalism; rather, it was all in how you perceived it.

Discussion

A leader in the professional learning of Ontario teachers, ETFO has worked hard to provide its members with the kind of self-directed learning opportunities that instill a vision of the teaching profession where teachers are valued for their expertise and respected for their ability to use their professional judgment in the best interest of students and the profession as a whole. However, faced with an ever-changing political context with respect to educational reform in the province, ETFO has also emerged over the past twenty years as a staunch political organization committed to the creation of fair and equitable conditions for teaching and learning.

Employing traditional union tactics of strikes and protests alongside a strong professional agenda focused on teacher learning and social justice, ETFO has attempted on a number of occasions to engage their members in combatting deficit ideologies around teacher professionalism that often find their way into the public discourse. In this way, the federation has also served as a platform for its members to become activists who collectively insert their voice into the larger policy arena in an attempt to counter-balance what might otherwise be a very one-sided approach to educational reform. Many of the ETFO members in this study espoused counter-hegemonic discourses that portrayed teachers as being autonomous experts and decision makers whose purview extended beyond any one classroom and included weighing in on the substantive issues of schooling, collaborating across the system, and engaging in a host of self-directed

professional learning and advocacy activities both as a function of teacher federations and beyond. Moreover, describing their association as “instrumental in facilitating professional growth” (ON1) it was clearly evident that participation in such activities impacted their espoused discourses, in addition to providing support for the enactment of such discourses. This further supports Bangs and MacBeath’s (2012) notion that teacher unions play “a dual role” in terms of “exercising leadership in their own right while seeking to empower their individual members” (p. 332).

That being said, engagement in teacher associations does not entirely account for the discourses presented by the union-active teachers in this study. Rather, the larger policy environment also played a role. For instance, despite ETFO’s best efforts, for many of the members in this study, the challenging political context and the deficit discourses within were a tangible constraining factor on the enactment of democratic discourses of teacher professionalism. In particular, the removal of administrators from the federations appears to represent a significant change in the relationship between teachers and principals. This, in turn, has impacted the kinds of extra-classroom work some members felt they should or could engage in. Moreover, the work-to-rule and strike action of 2012/13 and the media coverage of those events were perceived as having a significant impact on public discourse around education in Ontario. Participants were sometimes conflicted about teacher professionalism as they grappled with the juxtaposition of negative comments in the public and in the media and their own views around what constitutes being a professional teacher.

Yet, regardless of the presence of competing discourses that served to constrain and limit the enactment of democratic professionalism, all ETFO members in this study were purposefully inserting themselves into the broader educational context. In accordance with Hilferty’s (2004) notion that professionalism is an enacted discourse of power made visible not only through words but also in action, in this study, the extent to which managerial discourses served to deprofessionalize teachers largely depended on the extent to which teachers went about trying to shape the conditions of teaching and learning on their own accord. In other words, the politics of teacher professionalism and the struggle over discursive legitimacy was partly about government’s actions and partly about how teachers responded to those actions (McCulloch, Helsby, & Knight 2000).

In particular, the presence of mixed discourses suggests that the origin of discourses of professionalism is not as simplistic as from within and from without (McClelland, 1990). Rather, as evidenced by the “ebb and flow” of the collaborative relationships between the teacher associations and their respective governments, teachers and their unions co-penetrate the discourses of government and the public, and vice-versa, to produce what Faulconbridge and Muzio refer to as “hybrid” discourses (as cited in Evetts, 2011). This was particularly evident with respect to the success of the Ontario teacher federations in shifting the government’s discourse around professional learning from imposed and top-down to one of partnership during the early 2000s.

In this sense then, rather than being diametrically opposed discourses with distinct origins, it seems more appropriate to situate discourses of teacher professionalism from within and from without as a moving continuum, where hybrid discourses foreground and background different discursive elements at any given time. In other words, it is a delicate equilibrium, and not a lopsided autocracy, that determines which discourses make their way into the public sphere. In this sense then, teaching as a profession is not necessarily at “the far end of educational reform” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, p. 1) or “the ghost at the feasts” (Bangs & Frost, 2012, p. 1) with respect to policy making. Rather, teachers and their unions can impact the balance of professionalism discourses in important and substantive ways. The ETFO and its members have been doing this since the Harris years.

Conclusions

ETFO participants, to varying degrees, presented discourses of teacher professionalism that were rooted in democratic notions of the teacher as learner, leader, activist, and policy actor. Moreover, they enacted a discourse of professionalism that saw them extending their work beyond that of any one classroom or school and participated in regional and provincial networks where they engaged in dialogues and debates around a gamut of educational policy issues that significantly impact teaching and learning environments. Such discourses are in stark contrast to managerial portrayals of teacher professionalism that position teachers as mere technicians and as being increasingly managed and controlled (see Ball, 2003; Beck, 2008; Lipman, 2011; Robertson, 2012; Sachs, 2003). In this manner, the data from this study presents

an under-represented narrative of teacher professionalism where teachers enact their professionalism as “a discourse of power” (Hilferty, 2004), challenging the hegemonic discourses used by government and corporate media outlets and exercising their authority and agency as active participants in the educational policy arena.

Further to this, by providing teachers with a platform for inserting their voices into the larger policy picture, the study additionally highlights the important role that teacher associations can play as counter-balances to neoliberal agendas. A far cry from the widget model employed by traditional labour unions, ETFO advocated for the autonomy of its members to utilize their professional discretion and worked to secure context-specific conditions that facilitate greater understandings amongst students in order to raise the quality of education and the status of the teaching profession. The study also frames discourses of teacher professionalism as being influenced by both engagement in teacher organizations and the greater policy environment. In other words, the discourses from government and the corporate media and those of teachers and their teacher organizations evolved alongside and in relation to one another, amid policy reform and paradigm shifts that characterize the ebb and flow of educational change: two sides of the same coin rather than completely separate entities as they are often described in the current literature base.

It must be noted, however, that the data presented in this paper is by no means an exhaustive representation of all the discourses of professionalism present in Ontario or even ETFO. Moreover, with their dual pronged approach of tenacious militancy and steadfast professionalism, it is also arguable that ETFO is not a typical teacher union and, as such, is not representative of the wider organizational context. That being said, the study is rooted in the voices of the participants and provides plausible arguments and insights into the nature of the relationship between engagement in teacher associations and the broader policy environment, and the manner in which both work to impact the discourses of professionalism participants espoused and enacted in their daily teaching lives.

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