Enhancing Teacher Performance: The Role of Professional Autonomy

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ABSTRACT: Current teacher accountability initiatives such as those included in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation in the United States create particular difficulties that impact deleteriously on the performance of professional educators. The quality of public education is undermined when teachers are held accountable to an external authority rather than to themselves, their colleagues, and their professional associations. In this article, and in response to this concern, we argue that for teachers to strengthen their classroom performance, policy renewal is required on two separate fronts: first, we must restructure teachers' working conditions to support autonomous professional activity related to education; and second, teachers, both individually and collectively, must accept the concomitant responsibility to pursue personal professional development to improve their pedagogical work.

KEYWORDS: Communities of learning, teacher autonomy, academic freedom, professionalization, democracy, accountability, collaboration, professional development, teacher performance, neo-liberalism.

Introduction

The 30 years following World War II witnessed an expansion in teacher autonomy and professionalism within many Western democracies (Dale, 1989; Hargreaves, 2003). However, the economic downturn and the election of neo-liberal governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to a taming of the profession (Chan, Fisher & Rubenson, 2007a). Grimmett, Flemming and Trottier (2008), referring to the present context, argue the professionalization of teaching is crucial "to buffer education practices from the extreme ravages of macro-political neo-liberalist pressures that attempt to de-professionalize teachers as servants of the state merely carrying out public policy" (p. 18).

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Within a neo-liberal framework, the role of teachers in administrating public education, establishing curricular objectives and instructional design is threatened by instrumental objectives, standardized testing, and evidence-based practice. Hargreaves (2003) enumerates the effects of neo-liberal reforms on teacher autonomy:

> [Neo-liberal reforms] subjected teachers to public attacks; eroded their autonomy of judgment and conditions of work; created epidemics of standardization and over-regulation; and provoked tidal waves of resignation and early retirement, crises of recruitment, and shortages of eager and able educational leaders. The very profession that is often said to be of vital importance for the knowledge economy is the one that too many groups have devalued, more and more people want to leave, less and less want to join, and very few are interested in leading. (p. 11)

The working conditions Hargreaves describes prompt two major problems for teachers and for public education: a) talented teachers often reject the external micro management of contemporary teacher accountability initiatives and simply leave teaching for other vocations (Hargreaves, 2003); b) the erosion of professional autonomy actually undermines teacher initiative to accept personal responsibility for their work. To reverse the trend toward de-professionalization we argue that teacher educators must reject standardization, prepare teachers as public intellectuals, and form collaborative networks that emphasize a unique professional identity for teacher education and teaching (Grimmett, Flemming & Trotter, 2008).

While public education administrators have a responsibility to afford teachers professional working conditions, teachers have a reciprocal obligation to assume personal responsibility to improve their classroom practice. Professional autonomy enhances rather than undermines teacher responsibility by situating educators as the primary authors of their own success or failure. This professional personal responsibility encourages teachers to take ownership of their teaching and assume greater personal responsibility for student academic achievement. Contrary to current neo-liberal assumptions focused on increased teacher accountability to administrative authority, then, we argue for the importance of teaching becoming an autonomous professional vocation. Indeed, we are deeply concerned that undermining teaching as a profession prepares the ground for future political interference in both teaching practice and education policy development.

The De-professionalization of Teaching

The lack of professionalism afforded teachers is perhaps best exemplified during the induction of new members into the profession. Betts (2006) compiled a compelling study of teachers' early professional experience in New Brunswick, Canada. Her comprehensive review of the literature revealed widespread evidence of a reprehensible lack of professional collegiality in the treatment of new teachers across North America. Professional educators entering the field are routinely assigned the most difficult teaching roles in the school, provided no clear expectations for their work, assigned to teach subjects in which they often have little background, provided with inadequate resources, and generally left to work in virtual isolation (Betts, 2006).

Betts' study also revealed that it is not only administrators who hang new teachers out to dry but their closest colleagues are complicit in the practice as well, sometimes raiding a new teacher's classroom for basic resources. Based on these disturbing accounts of early professional experience it is small wonder that teaching is often described as a profession that "eats its young" (Halford, 1999, p. 14). The widespread lack of collegial concern undermines teachers' calls to be treated as autonomous professionals since professional autonomy entails not only self-determination, but professional responsibility toward colleagues as well.

The propensity of teachers to work in isolation from one another extends well beyond the formative years. Hargreaves (2003) points out that, "teaching has a long history of isolation" (p. 109). Palmer (1998) suggests that "we pay a high price for that privatization. The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (pp. 141-144). Similar to medicine, an effective teaching profession would require vigorous community debate about educational objectives, pedagogical practices, teacher preparation, and contemporary working conditions. Palmer concludes that, "if surgery and the law were practiced as privately as teaching, we would still treat most patients with leeches and dunk defendants in mill ponds" (1998, p. 144). Hence, while we call on policy makers to respect the professional autonomy of teachers, we simultaneously implore teachers to accept the responsibilities that accompany that autonomy.

Professional autonomy requires collaborative mentoring to support and enhance teaching practice, as well as dialogue about policy formation with other citizens and stakeholders in education. According

to Hargreaves (2003), with the aid of teacher educators teaching must become what he appropriately describes as,

> A grown-up profession, with grown-up norms of teaching where teachers are as much at ease with demanding adults as they are with problem children; where professional disagreement is embraced and enjoyed rather than avoided; where conflict is seen as a necessary part of professional learning, not a fatal act of professional betrayal. (p. 7)

A mature teaching profession is supported by three key pillars: a) the recognition of the professional autonomy of teachers, b) the grounding of that autonomy in a professional community of practice, and c) the engagement of individual teachers and the professional community in public dialogue about education.

Professional Autonomy and Teacher Performance

As Willms (2006) makes clear, a number of recent reform initiatives in many countries "are directed at changing teacher practice" (p. 13) by making them accountable to external monitoring:

> Perhaps the most prevalent universal intervention among OECD countries has been to increase the accountability of schools and schooling systems through the assessment of student performance. The underlying belief is that increased accountability will motivate administrators and teachers to improve the learning environment of schools. (p. 13)

While educators should be accountable in the same manner as other professionals, such accountability is best achieved by a vital professional community and not by external fiat.

Among university faculty, autonomy stands at the very core of creative scholarly work. Professional autonomy is protected by most universities under the term *academic freedom*, a concept the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT – 2005) describes as "the life blood of the modern university" (n.p.). The CAUT defines academic freedom as "the right to teach, learn, study, and publish free of orthodoxy or threat of reprisal and discrimination. It includes the right to criticize the university and the right to participate in its governance" (n.p.). Within universities, at least ideally, academic freedom encourages the free and unfettered exploration of ideas, including politically controversial ones, and promotes the creation of discipline and pedagogical knowledge by encouraging professional risk-taking. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1997) conducted a study in the United States that explored the impact of professionalization on

teacher development. The report predictably found that teacher autonomy, the degree of faculty influence on policy-making, practical assistance for new teachers, and fair salaries impacted directly on long term professional commitment.

Contrary to the popular political perspective promoting the micro management of teachers, professional autonomy and academic freedom do not imply there are no standards to adjudicate the performance of educators. Grimmett and Chinnery (In Press) correctly point out that,

> Teachers cannot do as they please. They [must] make judicious decisions about how to best foster learning. When this responsibility is absent, it is no longer about teachers exercising their professional judgement to create meaningful learning; rather it is a form of licentiousness that serves teachers' and ignores students' needs. (p. 16)

Professional autonomy, then, merely shifts the source of evaluation from administrative bureaucrats and politicians to professional educators themselves. The community of academic inquiry, comprised extensively of professional educators, becomes the basis for setting and applying standards for knowledge, learning, and pedagogical expertise (Seixas, 1993).

In its statement on Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS – 2005) offers a working definition of teacher autonomy. The council considers the professional education community the most appropriate vehicle to evaluate teaching competence in the same manner other professions such as medicine and law evaluate their members:

> A teacher's academic freedom includes his/her right and responsibility to study, investigate, present, interpret, and discuss all the relevant facts and ideas in the field of his/her professional competence. This freedom implies no limitations other than those imposed by generally accepted standards of scholarship. As a professional, the teacher strives to maintain a spirit of free inquiry, open-mindedness, and impartiality in the classroom. As a member of an academic community, however, the teacher is free to present in the field of his or her professional competence his/her own opinions or convictions and with them the premises from which they are derived. (n.p.)

If teachers are expected to teach for the kind of critical awareness and political engagement necessary for meaningful democratic citizenship they must enjoy the academic freedom to entertain new and controversial themes that extend beyond teaching popular ideas: “When one sees education as the practice of freedom, teachers voices become a

bridge between unnecessary human suffering and the struggle for justice. In refusing to be silenced, these voices also serve as a buffer against efforts toward compliance and conformity" (Grimmett & Chinnery, In Press, p. 22). Teachers must be free to explore controversial ideas regarding social justice issues with their students, colleagues, and administrators without explicit or implicit threats of recrimination.

The positive impact of vocational ownership and personal responsibility among teachers is extremely dependent on their level of professional autonomy. Our own personal histories working both inside and outside the university provide an example of how vocational ownership fosters professional development and personal accountability. We were personally employed for a number of years – one of us in the private business sector and the other in public schooling – before joining the ranks of university faculty. One major difference we noticed upon entering academic life is the way most faculty employ possessive pronouns when talking about their professional work. We commonly use pronouns such as "my" or "our" to describe the work we complete whereas we tended to consider labour completed outside the university as someone else's work to which we merely contributed and sometimes felt alienated from. Although the battle to protect academic freedom has intensified with neo-liberal reforms, we still consider our present scholarship, teaching, and service to be our own intellectual property and not the university's.

Vocational ownership may seem relatively unimportant to those who have not experienced the distinction we describe above but it has profound implications for the relationship between the worker and the quality of the work involved (Hyslop-Margison, 2005). One difference between our present labour and that performed before entering the university is the pursuit of excellence promoted by the personal intellectual and emotional investment we have in our current work. That is not to say we did not take our previous work seriously, but a sense of professional ownership causes us to be more rigorous in self-assessing what we accomplish within the various areas of academic responsibility. As Palmer (1998) proposes, "If a work is mine to do, it will make me glad over the long haul, despite the difficult days" (p. 30).

In *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) present a comprehensive synthesis of the research literature on teacher development. A central theme of the book is the irreducible complexity

of teaching, a complexity that is difficult to understand for those not directly involved in the profession:

> On a daily basis, teachers confront complex decisions that rely on many different kinds of knowledge and judgment and that can involve high-stakes outcomes for students' futures. To make good decisions, teachers must be aware of the ways in which student learning can unfold in the context of development, learning differences, language and cultural influences, and individual temperaments, interests and approaches to learning. (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 1)

This complexity rejects a simplistic understanding of teachers as mere technicians who simply implement the fiats of external authorities, and instead considers master teachers as "adaptive experts" (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 3) who continually reflect on their own practice in light of both professional knowledge and their particular teaching context. Similarly, the Canadian Deans of Education describe the competent teacher "as a professional who observes, discerns, critiques, assesses, and acts accordingly" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, n.d., p. 4).

Professional autonomy is exercised in the context of a professional community that collaboratively develops a shared consensus of what constitutes appropriate and effective professional practice. From this perspective, teaching practice is "disciplined innovation" (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald, et al., 2005, p. 363), the innovation of knowledgeable and creative acts situated in the broad context of professionally agreed upon ideas about sound classroom practice that remain open to adjustment and situational variables.

Collegial collaboration is also critical to the development of professional autonomy and self-imposed accountability. Hargreaves (2003) argues that the neo-liberal emphasis on competition in the educational "marketplace" and external accountability frequently thwart the professional collaboration required to enhance pedagogy and education. "Competition," he argues, "prevents schools and teachers from learning from one another. People keep their best ideas to themselves. Districts become the antithesis of learning organizations" (p. 168). Palmer (1998) draws a similar distinction between competition, which he characterizes as "a secretive zero sum game played by individuals for private gain," and professional conflict which "is open and sometimes raucous but always communal, a public encounter in

which it is possible for everyone to win by learning and growing" (p. 104).

Hargreaves (2003) calls for the creation of "professional learning communities" to improve collaboration that "put a premium on teachers working together, but insists that this joint work consistently focus on improving teaching and learning and use evidence and data as a basis for informing classroom improvement efforts and for solving school wide problems" (p. 169). Similarly, Kristmanson, Dicks, Le Bouthillier and Bourgoin, (2008a) point out,

> Key aspects of PLCs include collaboration, communication and commitment, a philosophy of ownership of and direct involvement in the professional development process, belief in the concept of shared leadership, administrative support, and a shared vision to improve some aspect of professional practice. (p. 37)

Their work with teachers in PLCs reports that teachers respond very positively to the professional autonomy and stimulation of the PLC environment while developing teaching expertise in specific areas (Kristmanson, Dicks & Le Bouthillier, 2008).

Expert teachers are able to do things that non-professionals or novices cannot such as noticing "patterns of classroom activity that, to the novice, often seem like disorganized chaos" (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 361). Expert teachers have the capacity to enact professionally appropriate responses "on the fly" (361). Van Manen (1991) refers to this ability as "the tact of teaching" and there is substantial evidence that it is developed through disciplined reflection on teaching practice in the context of community practice where teachers share and discuss their experience (Ayers & Schubert, 1992; Clandinin, Connelly & Craig, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Professional autonomy and teacher development require critical engagement with contemporary ideas about teaching and learning. A key component of a vibrant professional life is the continual exploration and critique of widely accepted knowledge and ideas. From this perspective, orthodoxy about classroom practice becomes suspect, and knowledge and ideas about teaching and learning remain open to re-examination and revision. Research about teaching is treated as an ongoing dialogue about contextual possibilities rather than affording immutable knowledge transmitted from the academic community to practicing teachers. Unfortunately, research and scholarship in teacher education are too often objectified to teachers as something they must simply accept rather than something they should critically engage. Hargreaves (2003) argues that teaching characterized by the autonomy

and vocational ownership we described above creates "strong communities [where] teachers can also have the competence and confidence to engage critically, not compliantly, with the research that informs their practice" (p. 29).

Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan (2008) point out that an increasing body of evidence "indicates that schools operating as PLCs are more effective and conducive to growth and change than those operating as traditional hierarchical bureaucracies" (p. 6). This evidence has spurred a number of jurisdictions to move toward school-based professional learning communities as official policy, a trend with great potential to enhance teacher autonomy and professional practice.

While professional learning communities at the school level are a key component of teacher autonomy and leadership they are insufficient for ensuring it. Sears and Perry (2000) point out that teaching takes place in a series of overlapping contexts which include classrooms, schools, school systems, and wider social structures. For teacher autonomy to be meaningful at the classroom and school levels it must be supported at the level of school systems and social structures: "It is unreasonable to expect schools to become PLCs while the district and provincial levels of the education system continue to operate as bureaucracies" (Williams et al., 2008, p. 2). External political interference is rejected to avoid aligning education policy and teaching with market forces, along with the political ideologies such measures entail.

One way to strengthen teacher autonomy is to enhance the professionalization of teaching generally. Fisher, and Rubenson (2007b) point out that "a central and defining characteristic of professions in modern society has traditionally been their high level of relatively autonomy" (p. 2). Across North America teaching has struggled to gain the sort of recognition and authority afforded to other professions particularly in terms of becoming self-regulating but there are some signs this is slowly changing. Ungerleider (1994) details the struggle of teachers in British Columbia to gain control over their own profession. The passing of *The Teaching Profession Act* in 1987 "established a College of Teachers with the power to establish and enforce professional standards related to training, certification, discipline, and the professional practice of teaching" and this "gave teachers control over entry to the profession, the preparation of its members, and the judgment of their competence" (p. 373). This was followed a decade later with the establishment of a similar college in Ontario.

While Chan, Fisher, and Rubenson (2007b) concur that these moves to self-governance are quite positive, they go on to argue that from the mid-1990s neo-liberal governments have attempted to claw back teacher autonomy in two ways. First, they contend, "accountability has come to dominate the educational policy discourse in Canada and pervade the majority of government documents and policies" (p. 221). Second, there is a move by governments to define enhanced teacher professionalism solely in terms of enhanced academic qualifications eschewing moves to further strengthen professional self-governance and autonomy. While teachers clearly need to be well educated, we concur with their argument that "the substitution of credentials for professional practice serves to undermine professionalism" (2007b, p. 2).

The move to establish colleges of teachers in both British Columbia and Ontario was met with significant opposition from teachers themselves through their respective labour unions concerned with additional accountability measures for teachers. This resistance underscores the importance of professional colleges being regulated and administrated by teachers themselves as opposed to simply creating a new managerial class that actually undermines teacher autonomy. When teachers are in this position, we concur with Ungerleider (2003) who argues "teachers are unlikely to build sympathetic support for their interests so long as they are perceived – rightly or wrongly – as being hostile to the regulation of the profession in the interest of the public" (p. 169). He contends that the colleges "have helped increase public confidence in the teaching profession by establishing standards for the preparation of teachers, the maintenance of their certification, and the suspension or revocation of certificates" (pp. 169-170). Teaching as a profession would be well served by enhancing and extending this kind of self-regulation across other jurisdictions.

Teachers and Public Discourse on Education

Professionalization aims to make teaching and teacher education, "a profession with a formal, research based body of knowledge that distinguishes qualified educators from lay persons" (Grimmett & Chinnery, In Press, p. 6). Teachers should not only exercise their professional autonomy to shape internal professional discussions about educational policy and determine best classroom practice, but also to influence their civic communities. Following Kennedy (2005) we maintain that teachers ought to exhibit a "civic professionalism" (p. 8) that extends into the public discourse about schools and education.

Kennedy argues convincingly that teachers ought to be engaged in a wide range of action within education. Education is a key area of public policy discourse and teachers, as autonomous professionals, ought to be engaged both individually and collectively through professional organizations in shaping education policy. The Canadian Deans of Education posit that “an effective initial teacher education program encourages teachers to assume a social and political leadership role” (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, n.d., p. 4).

Teachers and their professional associations need to be active in fostering debate about all aspects of education rather than those solely related to working conditions. For example, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (2006) website provides materials on a number of contemporary debates in education including educational governance, the role of technology, assessment and evaluation, and the impact of globalization on schooling.

While engaging in professional deliberation about education, teachers must also remember that other actors, including parents and community members, have a compelling stake in education and a right to influence public policy as well. Strike (1993) points out that professional autonomy is inconsistent with democratic decision-making if other stakeholders are arbitrarily excluded from public education policy formation: “the social relations between members of the community will have to be characterized by equality, autonomy, reciprocity, and a high level of respect for the construction of rational consensus” (p. 266). He adds teachers cannot legitimately assume that, “we possess a body of knowledge that gives our judgment authoritative privilege over yours” (p. 267). Wolterstorff (2002) argues that when drafting educational policy, teachers, parents, and community members have a responsibility to interact in a dialectical enterprise each respecting the other’s interest and expertise. Even with their acquired expertise, then, teachers as autonomous professionals “are not relieved of the burden to persuade the community” (Strike, 1993, p. 268).

Conclusion

There is little doubt among members of the educational community that current accountability measures and the de-professionalization of teaching is impacting negatively on the quality of teaching and education more generally. Many creative and energetic teachers are driven from the vocation by a working environment influenced more by politics than thoughtful policy development. In this article we have

underscored the important role professional autonomy must play in strengthening classroom practice and improving public education. We have also emphasized the corresponding responsibilities teachers must accept as they assume increased ownership over their work.

William Ayers (2004) articulates the responsibility teachers confront not only in protecting their own professional autonomy, but also in advancing the intellectual autonomy of their students. From our perspective the two objectives are intrinsically connected:

> We teachers stand on the side of our students. We create a space where their voices can be heard, their experiences affirmed, their lives valued, their humanity asserted, enacted. Students cannot enter schools as "objects" – thingified doohickeys and widgets – and emerge as "subjects" – self-determined, conscious meaning makers, thoughtful, caring, self-activated, and free. (p. 102)

Teachers cannot be expected to prepare autonomous, reflective and politically engaged citizens unless they possess the professional autonomy and political freedom to act as a role model for their students. Professional autonomy for teachers is not merely a fundamental requirement of quality education, but for creating students who become engaged and politically active democratic citizens. In the final analysis, the neo-liberal policies seeking to de-professionalize teaching are actually creating an inefficacious and unethical situation that undermines teacher competence, vocational ownership and the advancement of robust democratic schooling practices.

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