Teacher Professional Identity: competing discourses, competing outcomes

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In this paper I focus issues of professional identity of teachers in Australia under conditions of significant change in government policy and educational restructuring. My argument is in two parts. First I argue that two competing discourses are shaping the professional identity of teachers. These discourses are democratic and managerial professionalism. Democratic professionalism is emerging from the profession itself and while managerialist professionalism is being reinforced by employing authorities through their policies on teacher professional development with their emphasis on accountability and effectiveness. The second part of the paper examines the types of professional identity emerging from these discourses and the influence these discourses will have on the teaching profession itself in terms of its ability to provide moral and intellectual leadership for the profession of teaching.

Dominant discourses of teacher professionalism

In Australia government policy regarding teacher professional development and the underpinning notions of teacher professionalism has been informed by two dominant discourses: democratic professionalism and managerial professionalism (Preston, 1995,1996). According to Preston (1996, p. 192) democratic professionalism was a concept used by the then Australian Teachers Union (ATU). For the ATU: democratic professionalism does not seek to mystify professional work, nor to unreasonably restrict access to that work; it facilitates the participation in decision making by students, parents and others and seeks to develop a broader understanding in the community of education and how it operates. As professionals, teachers must be responsible and accountable for that which is under their control, both individually and collectively through their unions (Australian Teachers Union, 1991, pp. 1-2, quoted in Preston 1996, p. 192)

The core of democratic professionalism is an emphasis on collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders. Preston (1995) maintains that this approach is a strategy for industry development, skill development and work organisation. According to Brennan (1996) it suggests that the teacher has a wider responsibility than the single classroom and includes contributing to the school, the system, other students, the wider community, and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession.

Initiatives to enhance teacher professionalism such as the Innovative Links Project and the National Schools Network (NSN) are premised on a democratic view of professionalism. Both these projects do much more than help teachers develop better ways of improving their practice. Referring to the NSN, Preston (1996) suggests that these projects are developing and testing better ways of carrying out research to consolidate the knowledge base of the teaching profession through close collaboration between practising teachers and academics. The primary aim of school-based teacher inquiry in these projects is to foster understanding and improvement of practice; and to help teachers to come to know the epistemological bases of their practice (Cochrane Smith and Lytle, 1998, Sachs, 1999). Through facilitated research, academics and school-based practitioners work collaboratively in mutually identified projects. Their focus, their modes of affiliation, forms of documentation and communication become the vehicle for a more inclusive form of teacher professionalism. At the core of this activity are new forms of reciprocity between teachers and academics and
other education stakeholders whereby both groups come to understand the nature and limitations of each other’s work and perspectives. However, Preston (1996, p. 196) correctly observed that while the Innovative Links project is integrated into the everyday work of schools, it does not make the same connections with university education faculties. It breaks down the individualism of teachers’ work, but does not do the same for academics’ work.

With devolution and decentralisation an alternative view of teacher professionalism has emerged. I refer to this as managerial professionalism. According to Rees (1995, p.15) managerialism is an ideology with two distinct claims: that efficient management can solve any problem; and that practices which are appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be applied to the public sector. Furthermore, as Pollitt (1993) notes, the values of managerialism have been promoted as being universal: management is inherently good, managers are the heroes, managers should be given the room and autonomy to manage and other groups should accept their authority. Rees’ (1995) research on scientists from the CSIRO’s McMaster laboratory at the University of Sydney elicited some cogent responses regarding researchers’ perceptions of the managerial intentions and the rationalisation of their organisation. Rees drew attention to three trends: the disempowering role of management consultants; management’s preoccupation with control; and loss of morale among highly trained professionals who had previously been very committed to their work and the organisation.

The same claims could well be made for Australian education systems under devolution and decentralisation. In this form of governance and management, teachers are placed in a long line of authority in terms of their accountability for reaching measurable outcomes that stretches through the principal, to the district/regional office, to the central office. Brennan (1996, p. 22) describes this corporate management model as emphasising:

a professional who clearly meets corporate goals, set elsewhere, manages a range of students well and documents their achievements and problems for public accountability purposes. The criteria of the successful professional in this corporate model is of one who works efficiently and effectively in meeting the standardised criteria set for the accomplishment of both students and teachers, as well as contributing to the school’s formal accountability processes.

Managerialism has also had a significant impact on the work of school principals, as well as teachers. Recent educational reforms in most Australian states to promote devolution and decentralisation have relied heavily on managerialist structures to ensure implementation and compliance of a frequently resistant profession. Recent restructuring has meant that the principal has moved from the role of senior colleague to one of institutional manager. Ferguson (1994) describes the impact of these reforms on the teaching profession

the reform movement and the drive towards managerialism prudently took the initial professional formation of teachers within its ambit. Together they have led to a careful scrutiny of the sources of notions of professionalism and collective self-concept, and the values, assumptions and expectations that are associated with them: the entire gamut of the processes of group socialization, combined with the development of professional identity and allegiance to academic community’ ... (p. 106).

In terms of teachers’ professional development and the profession’s moves to establish new and more active notions of teacher professionalism, the managerialist approach directly contrasts the democratic version described earlier. Furthermore, advocates of each of these kinds of professionalism are often at loggerheads with each other because unions and other
professional bodies adopt democratic professionalism while systems and employers advocate managerial professionalism.

Recent reforms particularly concerning devolution and marketisation have given rise to a set of paradoxes about the nature of teaching as a profession and about the professional identity and professional development of teachers. First, is that the call for teacher professionalism related to a revisioning of occupational identity, is occurring at a time when there is evidence that teachers are being deskilled and their work is intensified. Second, is that while it is acknowledged that rethinking classroom practice is exceptionally demanding, fewer resources are being allocated to teacher learning. Third, the teaching profession is being exhorted to be autonomous while at the same time it is under increasing surveillance by politicians and the community to be more accountable and to maintain standards. As a consequence of the paradoxes underpinning the changes in education policy and practice the very idea of teacher professionalism and professional identity needs to be debated and resolved. I now turn to discuss the ideas of professional identity.

Professional Identity

In terms of its orthodox uses, the idea of professional identity is rarely taken as problematic. It is used to refer to a set of externally ascribed attributes that are used to differentiate one group from another. Professional identity thus is a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself. From this perspective it is an exclusive rather than inclusive ideal and is conservative rather than radical in its intent. Identity provides a shared set of attributes, values and so on so that enable the differentiation of one group from another. Following Epstein identity is essentially a concept of synthesis, integration and action:

It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his (sic) various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self

(Epstein, 1978, p. 101)

Under current conditions of change, uncertainty and continuous educational restructuring teacher professional identity emerges out of what Bernstein (1996) refers to as retrospective and prospective identities. The retrospective identities use as resources narratives of the past that provide exemplars and criteria for the present and for the future. A sub-set of the retrospective identity, the elitist identity, uses a narrative of the past to provided exemplars, criteria and standards of conduct. It is an amalgam of knowledge, sensitivities ... (p. 78). Alternatively, prospective identities are essentially future orientated. The may well use and rest upon narrative resources, but the narrative resources of prospective identity constructions ground the identity in the future. As Bernstein (1996, p. 79) argues ‘prospective identities change the basis for collective recognition and relation’. Prospective identities are launched by social movements, and are engaged in conversion through their engagement with economic and political activity to provide for the development of their new potential. These are important points when rethinking the issue of a new teacher professional identity. They point to collective action by teachers that is both industrial and professional. The industrial component comes through the activities of teacher unions and deals with conditions of work, remuneration and social recognition while at the same time contributing to the professional identity and recognition of teachers through on-going professional development activities. The Education Accord between unions and Government in Australia in the early 1990s marked out possibilities for this to happen (see Sachs 1997, and Seddon 1996)
In times of rapid change identity cannot be seen to be a fixed ‘thing’, it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended power-laden enactment of those meanings in everyday situations (Kondo, 1990, p. 24). Wenger (1998, p. 149) identifies five dimensions of identity, which are useful. These are: i. identity as negotiated experiences where we define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation as well as the way we and others reify our selves. ii. identity as community membership where we define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar; iii. identity as learning trajectory where we define who we are by where we have been and where are going; iv. identity as nexus of multi membership where we define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of identity into one identity; and v. identity as a relation between the local and the global where we define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and manifesting broader styles and discourses. I suggest that these five dimensions of identity have application in developing a revised view of professional identity for teachers. Any reconceptualised notion of professional identity needs incorporate these characteristics. Here identity and practice mirror each other. As Wenger (1998, p. 149) argues “there is a profound connection between identity and practice. Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants”.

Within the context of uncertainty and multiple educational restructurings teachers’ professional identity is not straightforward. I would suggest that there would be incongruities between the defined identity of teachers as proposed by systems, unions and individual teachers themselves and that these will change at various times according to contextual and individual factors and exigencies. Identity must be forever re-established and negotiated. It defines our capacity to speak and act autonomously and allows for the differentiation of ourselves from those of others while continuing to be the same person (Melucci 1996). For teachers this is a challenge given that governments do not see it to be in their best interests to have a vocal and autonomous teaching service. When teachers do act autonomously their behaviour is often sanctioned by their employing authorities. Nevertheless the development and sustaining of a strong professional identity is what distinguishes the expertise of teachers that differentiates them from other workers.

It may well be not very productive to talk about professional identity in an essentialised way. Clearly teachers inhabit multiple professional identities. For a primary school teacher for example, these might include the general category of primary teacher. However this can be broken down into further identities by year level, such as a junior, middle or upper school teacher; a subject or discipline specific teacher such as special education teacher, music teacher, physical education teacher and so on. These people may see themselves as belonging to the generic category of primary teacher but also identify with their area of specialisation and year level. A similar logic follows in secondary schools but with more categories for differentiation along subject/discipline, year level lines. I suggest that while any idea of a fixed teacher professional identity is unproductive never the less, it can serve the needs of the State by providing a framework for externally initiated controls. These controls set the limits for what can be said about teacher professional identity and at the same time defining what must remain unsaid on pain of censure. In such situations teacher professional identity serves bureaucratic purposes, in so far as control of debates about is meaning are taken from outside the people who ‘live’ on a daily basis, teachers themselves. I argue that an entrepreneurial identity emerges in response to managerialist discourses. I now turn to elaborate this.

The entrepreneurial identity

Under the conditions of public sector management reform a new model of professional identity is emerging. This is what Menter, Muschamp, Nicholls, Ozga and Pollard (1997)
refer to as the entrepreneurial professional who will identify with the efficient, responsible and accountable version of service that is currently promulgated.

Ferguson (1994) has the following to say regarding the consequences of managerialism for the teaching profession:

The potential impact on the constitution, standing, identity, autonomy and authority of the profession is enormous. The socialisation of intending teachers into the mores, values, understandings of what it means to be a teacher will switch from being developed in a collective setting of debate informed by theory, research and evidence, to one in which socialization is entirely dependent on two or three teachers. New teachers' capacities to act autonomously, work independently and most of all mount well-grounded challenges to managerial diktat are likely to diminish, and their sense of membership and solidarity of a larger body to be diluted (pp. 106-107).

Menter et al (1997) go on to add that "judgement about priorities, appropriateness and efficacy, once the preserve of the expert, guided by rules and precedent, is ignored or excluded" (p. 57). The revision of teacher professionalism across the public sector has very significant consequences for both teachers' work and teacher professional identity.

Under managerialist discourses the market will play an important part in how teachers constitute their professional identity collectively and individually. Competition for reduced resources between schools will give rise to a competitive ethos, rather than a collaborative one. The efficient operation of the market is fostered through the combination of legislative controls and internal, institutional mechanisms, notably performance indicators and inspections, which ostensibly provide consumers with a basis for selection but more importantly provide managerial imperatives (Menter et al 1997, p. 64).

New Zealand is a case in point where managerialism and marketisation characterised education policy and practice during the late 1980s until the present. Standardised measures of performance enabled schools to be ranked by their customers, market competition penalised non-conformity in teaching and learning, and the national curriculum functioned as a system of cultural control, 'a standardised language, a narrative history of national destiny, so a normative, monocultural definition of community claiming the legitimacy of familiar values and an external identity (Marginson 1997, p. 190)

In the UK, the fundamental aims of the New Right policies in education are to remove costs and responsibilities as a means of raising standards from the state and thus improve efficiency and responsiveness as a means of raising standards of performance. Putting education into the market place means making education appear more like a commodity so that parents are given access to a range of products from which they can select. In this framework, schools become more efficient in response to competition (Menter, et al 1997, p. 26)

I suggest that under managerialist conditions a cult of individualism would re-infect the occupational culture of teachers. This individualism develops in response to teachers working conditions is characterised by isolation and privacy. As Andy Hargreaves (1992) observes "individualism is primarily a shortcoming, not a strength, not a possibility; something to be removed rather than something to be respected" (p. 171). Individualism is in stark contrast to collaboration and collegiality that are the cornerstones democratic discourses and the development of an activist professional identity.

*The activist identity*
An activist identity emerging from democratic discourses has clear emancipatory aims. An activist identity emerges in democratic schools. Such schools are characterised by the following:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good".
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealised" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as people.
7. The organisation of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (Beane and Apple, 1997, pp. 6-7)

First and foremost democratic schools and an activist identity are concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression. Accordingly the development of this identity is deeply rooted in principles of equity and social justice. These are not only for the teaching profession but also for a broader education constituency of parents and importantly students.

I argued earlier that a revised professional identity requires a new form of professionalism and engagement. Redefining teacher professional identity as an activist identity involves two main elements; the effort to shed the shackles of the past, thereby permitting a transformative attitude towards the future; and second, the aim of overcoming the illegitimate domination of some individuals or groups over others.

In order to achieve this I suggest two strategies, each is interconnected with the other. First, the teaching profession at the individual and collective level should acknowledge the importance of professional self-narratives (Gergen and Gergen 1988). These are culturally provided stories about selves and their passage through lives that provide resources drawn upon by individuals in their interactions with one another and with themselves. For Gergen and Gergen narratives are, in effect, social constructions, undergoing continuous alteration as interaction progresses ... the self narrative is a linguistic implement constructed by people in relationships to sustain, enhance or impede various actions. Self-narratives are symbolic systems used for such social purposes as justification, criticism and social solidification (1988, p. 20-21).

The teachers themselves construct these self-narratives, and they relate to their social, political and professional agendas. These self-narratives are stories of stories, they are reflexive in that they are understood both by the individual and by others. For teachers these self-narratives are often tacit, they operate at the level of the taken-for-granted. They are developed during their own schooling and then embedded and reinforced in the course of the professional lives in schools and so on.

These self-narratives provide a glue for a collective professional identity and provide a provocation for renewing teacher professionalism. It is important that stories are made public, not necessarily in a written sense but at least shared so they are communicated in a
way that can be shared, debated and contested by others. I suggest that making these narratives public is a source for lively professional development. It provides opportunities for teachers to communicate with each other about what they think schooling, education, subject knowledge, pedagogy and so on is about. Furthermore it gives rise to a more active, spirited debate about policy and practice. Critical self-narratives about professional identity at the individual and collective level have clear emancipatory objectives. These objectives, I suggest are towards an activist stance and the development of an activist identity. Elsewhere (Sachs 1998, Sachs forthcoming) I have identified a protocol for an activist professional and described the conditions that would help facilitate its development.

Democratic discourses give rise to the development of communities of practice. These communities of practice are not self-contained entities. They develop in larger contexts – historical, social, cultural, institutional – with specific reference to resources and constraints. Some of these conditions and requirements are explicitly articulated. Some are implicit but no less binding (Wenger 1998, p. 79). Within these communities there are various levels and degrees of expertise that should be seen as a shared set of professional resources. They require sustained engagement, and at the same time demand the development and negotiation of shared meanings. They are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful. Nor are they privileged in terms of positive or negative effects. They are a force to be reckoned with. Wenger (1998, p. 85) argues: "as a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people’s lives". Communities of practice that articulate around issues of professional practice can have profound impacts on teachers’ lives. Core dimensions of in the operation of these communities of practice is the work of engagement and imagination. The former requires the ability to take part in meaningful activities and interactions, in the production of sharable artifacts, in community-building conversations, and in the negotiation of new situations (Wenger 1998, p. 184). The latter requires the ability to disengage. The work of engagement and imagination is fundamental to the development of an activist professional identity. Both provide the structural and affective conditions for the role of teacher activist to be legitimated, recognised and practiced. Wenger (1998, p. 185) suggests that imagination needs:

- the willingness, freedom, energy and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations. It requires the ability to proceed without being too quick within the constraints of a specific form of accountability, to accept non-participation as an adventure, and to suspend judgment

Communities of practice provide the context and conditions for teachers to develop an activist identity. They facilitate values of respect, reciprocity and collaboration. Communities of practice and an activist identity are coextensive, each nourishes and supports the other.

Conclusion

In this paper I have identified two discourses which I argue have dominated education policy and practice in recent times. I have suggested that these discourses and the assumptions that inform them give rise to two quite distinct forms of teacher identity. The managerialist discourse gives rise to an entrepreneurial identity in which the market and issues of accountability, economy, efficiency and effectiveness shape how teachers individually and collectively construct their professional identities. Democratic discourses, which are in distinct contrast to the managerialist ones give rise to an activist professional identity in which collaborative cultures are an integral part of teachers’ work practices. These democratic discourses provide the conditions for the development of communities of practices. These communities of practice are collegial, negotiated and they form and reform
around specific issues. Communities of practice are primarily concerned with engaging with some enterprise but also in figuring out how this engagement fits in the broader scheme of things (Wenger 1998).

New times and conditions require new teacher identities to develop. There is now some evidence suggesting that the market is no longer the appropriate metaphor nor structure in which education policies and practices develop. Under more democratic conditions, where teacher knowledge and expertise is recognised and rewarded, an activist teacher professional identity gives rise to new forms of public and professional engagement by teachers themselves and the broader population. Activist teacher professional identity gives rise to new forms of association of teachers among themselves and others. It gives rise to new work practices and more flexible ways thinking about practice. Teachers’ professional identities are rich and complex because they are produced in a rich and complex set of relations of practice (Wenger 1998, p. 162). This richness and complexity needs to be nurtured and developed in conditions where there is respect, mutuality and communication. An activist teacher professional identity is not something that will come naturally to all teachers. It has to be negotiated, lived and practiced. The development of such an identity will be a challenge for many, but once its elements are learned and communicated to others it will make a significant contribution to teachers work and how they experience that work in the eyes of themselves and others.

References


