The accommodation of contested identities: The impact of participation in a practice-based masters programme on beginning teachers' professional identity and sense of agency

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Beginning Teachers accommodate contested professional identities.
- Masters' study animates Beginning Teachers' sense of occupational professionality.
- External mentoring extends Beginning Teachers' professional identity.
- Ownership of data develops Beginning Teachers' sense of professional agency.
- Professional development of Beginning Teachers should foster occupational professionality.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Teachers' professional training and development has been the focus of intense academic and political debate. This paper contributes to this by considering Beginning Teachers' (BTs') self-views of their professional identity. The findings are derived from a mixed methods study with questionnaires (n = 886) and focus groups and interviews (n = 60) with BTs in Wales. Drawing on a socio-cultural approach, the findings illustrate how BTs' integration of competing professional identities bolstered their sense of professional agency. These findings have salience within a policy context where both teacher education and professional development are increasingly aligned with the narrow organizational objectives of the school.

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1. Introduction

Sachs (2016, p. 414) poses the rhetorical question: teacher professionalism, why are we still talking about it? Her answer is that we need to talk about it, not least to counter what she categorizes as "top down" approaches to teaching. These top-down approaches have been aligned with what has been categorized as organizational professionalism, often represented as the antithesis of occupational accounts of professional practice. Organizational professionalism is closely aligned to realizing organizational objectives through standardization and technicist decision-making within increasingly hierarchical work structures; while occupational professionalism is based around a collegial commitment to discretion, autonomy within more horizontally-organised professional work structures. However, these antithetical accounts have been superseded by research (Sachs, 2016; Evetts, 2009a; 2012) which focuses on how these competing professional discourses are utilised, appropriated and integrated in professional work settings and practice. This paper will draw on such approaches to illustrate how Beginning Teachers (BTs) studying a practice-based masters programme appropriated, accommodated and in some cases integrated differing understandings of professional practice derived

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from their initial teacher training, school environment and, in particular, their masters' study to inform their self-view and sense of professional identity.

The increasing influence of organizational professionalism has resulted in professions generally – and teaching especially – undergoing fundamental change or, as Evetts (2012, p. 1) suggests, "turbulent times". This turbulence in the UK has manifested in a teacher recruitment shortfall and high levels of attrition amongst beginning teachers (BTs) - see, for example, Davies, Connolly, Kirkman, and Greenway (2016). The original responses to such turbulence were varied. Some argued that the organizational restructuring of professional work enervated traditional "occupational" professionalism leading to de-professionalization (see – for classic examples – the earlier work of Evetts, 2009a, 2009b; Ball, 2003, 2016; Ozga, 1995); while others claim that such restructuring has precipitated the emergence of alternative professional identities and practices (for a classic account see Hoyle, 1974; or Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Such accounts have been superseded by recent research which has focussed on both the interplay of discourses within professional organizations (Evetts, 2012; Sachs, 2016) and how these are appropriated and integrated by teachers themselves to promote their sense of professional agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). However, as Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) acknowledge, there are often tensions within education systems as they attempt to foster and promote individual agency and innovation while mandating collective approaches to professional practice that limit the agency of teachers. Within this paper we consider whether approaches to the professional practice of teachers within one country in the UK- Wales- either fosters or limits teachers' professional agency.

Despite extensive theorization of teacher professionalism, there is a lack of substantive, empirically-driven research within the UK into how the interplay of different discourses shape teachers' sense of professionalism and how these play out in their professional lives. The paper starts to address this gap in the research through an analysis of teachers working within the Welsh education system which has developed its own approaches to teacher professionalism. The paper draws on a study conducted with almost 900 BTs working within the Welsh education system who took part in a Welsh Government sponsored Masters level programme of professional development (the Masters in Educational Practice [MEP]).

We will begin by drawing on sociological approaches to the professions to provide an overview of debates around professionality generally to contextualize classic and contemporary considerations of teachers' − particularly BTs' − professional identity. More specifically we describe how, after a period in which professional identity tended to be theorised in categorical and often oppositional terms which focussed underpinning moral and normative values, debates have moved on to consider 'hybrid' identities and teachers' construction and management of these identities (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Sachs, 2016). We will then provide the policy context within which the BTs in this study are working and, finally, the background and approach to professional learning which informed the MEP Programme from which the empirical data is derived.

2. Professionalism: a 'Third Logic'?

The evolutionary narrative of the sociology of the professions is well established (Abbot, 1988). Initial approaches delineated both the attributes and functions of professional practice, while later work attempted to differentiate the professions from bureaucratic or market-based approaches to organizing work (Freidson, 2001). The role played by formal training in an intellectual area was key in attempts to differentiate the '"logic" of professional work from that of the market and organization. Freidson (2001, p. 7) argued for the retention of "the ideal typical position of professionalism" whereby "a particular specialization requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning" which facilitates the application of discrete decision-making in complex and often sensitive work environments. Other "logics" of professional work Friedson identified include collegiality in the workplace; ethical practice guided by specialist codes of conduct; and an orientation towards serving the public – often referred to as a 'vocation'. To realize this important contribution to civil society Freidson (2001) argued that professional work required decentralized and horizontal organizational structures and an ethical commitment to foster collaborative work practices necessary for the delivery of inherently complex public services- "logics" that form the basis of an occupational account of professional practice.

3. The de/reprofessionalization debate

While celebrating the Third Logic of professionalism Freidson (2001) identified a paradigmatic shift within the organization of professional work through "contamination" by the alternative logics of managerialism and commercialism (the tenets of organizational professionalism). These alternative logics manifest themselves in bureaucratic proliferation, enforced standardization, hierarchical structures, technicist approaches to practice and techno-rational approaches to knowledge implemented in an attempt to promote and foster commercialized practices. Critics of such reforms categorized as "neo-liberal governance models" (Casey, 2012, p. 1) or the proletarianization of professional work (Reed, 2007), have argued that they have resulted in the emergence of a culture of accountability. Ball, for example, dismisses this accountability as the "terror of performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 215) which is anathema to the integrity and autonomy which is the sine qua non of professional practice.

Fundamental to organizational professionalism is the use of data for governance (Ozga, 2009; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011): Ball (2015, p. 299) characterizes this as the "tyranny of numbers", while recent research (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2016; Roberts-Holmes, 2015) argues that "datafication" or the "fetishization of data" (Hardy & Lewis, 2016) has restricted pedagogy and practice within the earliest phases of schooling. This thesis argues that the culmination of data-led "surveillance" is professional uncertainty as one's social identity is challenged. Within this thesis, the subversion of autonomy rendered by accountability has resulted in the claim that those working within organizations deemed professional have been subjected to a "deprofessionalization". Amongst the most committed advocates of such a thesis are those who argue that such organizational restructuring is the antithesis of professional work: Ball (2012, p. 28) invokes Yeats' *Second Coming* to describe a "rough beast … slouching towards us" to illustrate the effects that what he categorizes as neoliberal reformulations have had on professional practice.

While not endorsing a 'deprofessionalisation' approach, other educational researchers have recognized that shifts in policy have altered teachers' professional practice and identity in a number of ways: the subversion of teacher autonomy (whether this is real or, as Whitty (2008) suggests, "de facto" autonomy); bureaucratization and managerialism; the prioritization of accountability over performance; a deficit of trust; and the stifling of creativity.

4. Re-professionalization, integration and agency

There is a tendency within some accounts of deprofessionalization to represent the professional as a passive victim of the