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Professionalism in Education

An overview

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Professionalism in education

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Professions and professionalism: Philosophical underpinnings

Green (2009: 5) defines 'profession' as being a function that comprises actions 'directed at some specific end that could be a human need or good'. Carr (2000) and Eraut (1994) tell us that in the previous decades, there were diverse interpretations given to the meaning of 'profession', but they did not satisfy the differences and categorisations of professions and occupations comprehensively. Knowledge acquisition and the practice of expertise in occupations and professions were controlled by the social system, status and power.

Ritzer (1975) proposes a noteworthy sociological critique to explain these differences in the light of two main sociological theories: the *functionalist* theory and the *conflict* theory. According to him, these two theories perceive the society differently: the functionalist theory perceives the society as an orderly entity in which members contribute to its stability with integrity. The functionalist considers the society members to be bonded by their adherence to norms, values and common morality that could be a high level of responsibility, choice and judgement, i.e. a high level of human agency and moral responsibility (MacIntyre, 1999). In contrast, the conflict theory perceives the society as a constantly changing entity in which members continue to cause disintegration, disorganisation and coercion that is influenced by social power. So, the understandings and actions of the individual, the group and the organisation construct, the dynamic social structures and systems are seen to be strongly influenced by 'social facts that are external and coercive' (p. 159), such as roles, values, groups, families, norms, institutions and the social system. Dilthey (1962: 69) suggests that the individuals' biographies and private histories of their lived experiences accumulate to build the collective/social culture and history of the place 'through the medium of culture and history, through states, [churches], institutions, customs, books and works of art.' Dilthey's understanding corroborates with Tuan's (1996: 72) inclusive conception of the 'personality of a place' in the visual and experiential sense, in the relationship of people

with the geographical space that create 'richly-furnished personal and cultural worlds'. Wilkins (2014) complements further this understanding by considering the various qualities and influences individuals and groups bring to the place as 'human footprints' that impact the place's personality.

In the same vein, upon reflecting on the context at hand, one can say that the social facts mentioned above could be considered the constituents of and influence the overlapping spheres in the dynamic processes of three types of education, referred to by Wilkins (2014) as formal (schools and higher education), non-formal (religious institutions and workplaces) and informal (inclusive everyday learning). It is this wide-ranging education that creates a chronology of learning experiences in the personal, social and professional lives of people (Brock, 2011, Wilkins, 2014).

Considering the above sociological theories, it is important, within a given context, to develop an awareness and understanding of the norms, values, perceptions and actions of responsibility as indicators of common morality, choice and judgement. Engaging in this reflective process might help in examining the perceptions and actions of disintegration and disorganisation that could be caused by individuals and communities within their social and institutional/organisational contexts This requires us to know the private and social histories embedded in these contexts, what sort of social structures and systems were formed over time, to understand better what kind of social power influenced the understandings and actions of individuals and the society at large. It is also necessary to understand how social structures influence the formation of individual, collective and professional identities in a society.

The influence of the social structure and systems on the formation of the individual, collective and professional identities

Burke and Stets (2009) define identity as the 'set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. Hence, the identity of an occupant is shaped by the meanings that are embedded in the culture and place of the society/community that he/she inhabits; their personal characteristics are formed and are continuously influenced and re-formed by the social structure and systems that, formally and informally, govern this society/community. Jenkins (2008: 5)

emphasises the relation between identity and identification when he considers identity as an interested relational identification with places, things or people: it is 'the capacity of individuals and groups – rooted in language' to know and situate themselves and others within the human world. Jenkins (2008), Burke and Stets (2009) agree on the multiple identities that individuals have in a society due to the inter-relatedness aspect of their social lives that allocate multiple roles to them. This is an implication of their multiple personal characteristics and the interested identification with multiple groups within their society/community. Individuals' identifications with places, people, things and worldviews construct their agency towards them. These connotations suggest that 'identity is a product of structure and agency' (Stevenson, 2006: 414), and that there is inter-dependence and reciprocal influence between the identity, agency of the individuals and groups in a society and the social structures and systems of the place. Of special note in this study is the identity of the place.

The above indicates that, in their professional practice, the personal characteristics, the values and worldview, the professional and tacit knowledge, the conduct, the attitudes towards personal learning, students' teaching and learning, leadership and progress, that teachers and school leaders possess construct key aspects of their individual capacities as professionals (Eraut, 2000; Pope and Denicolo, 1993; Lasky, 2005). Teachers' and school leaders' individual capacities allow them to define themselves to themselves and to the others, and the embeddedness of their individual capacities in the multiple socio-cultural, political and organisational contexts in which they live their experiences construct their professional identities (Dilthey, 1962; Ricoeur, 1992; Ball and Goodson, 1985; Lasky, 2005). A more detailed synthesis of professional identity will follow the definitions and discussion of professionalism and professionality.

Professionalism: Chronology of western historical perspectives

Friedson's (1994: 10) 'traditional' view and Evans (2008) of professionalism describes it as the ideology that governs the work and standards of an occupation that provides a service within a special set of institutions. Focusing on the individuals who perform the work, Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) define professionalism as 'something which defines and articulates the quality and character of people's actions within that group'. Evans' (2008: 7) draws attention to the plurality in those definitions and others when she

explains that professionalism is considered broadly as a collective concept of a function that represents the 'identification and expression of what is required and expected of members and professions'.

Before the 1970s – and based on the functionalist theory – expert knowledge assured and regulated professional ethics in labour divisions and occupations. Traditional professionalism was characterised by the following traits: 'skill based on theoretical/specialist knowledge, adherence to a professional code of conduct and self-regulation, trust-based client relationship, independence and altruism' (Lunt, 2008: 76). As a result, all professions became contextually differentiated based on their expert knowledge acquisition and social need, cultural importance, hence their status, power and economic value (Carr, 2000; Eraut, 1994). Law and medicine, for example, were regarded as full professions (Carr, 2000); according to Eraut (1994: 1) they were considered the 'ideal type' professions. Professions like teaching and nursing were considered 'semi' or 'quasi' professions. However, in their historical and heuristic review of the teaching professions in England, Hoyle and John (1995) maintain that **knowledge, autonomy** and **responsibility** – that are three key dimensions of professionalism – are also central elements in the educational practice.

From the 1970s onwards, conflict sociologists and professional associations, saw that the greed for more power and wealth, influenced by the high social status and professional competence and power, contaminated the ethics and trust between the professionals and the public, leading the public to question the expert knowledge and skills of the professionals – a change that threatened the bargain. Additionally, Power (2008: 150) shows how the advancements in technology resulting in the 'information age' added to the challenge faced by traditional professionalism. The continuously renewed knowledge became accessible to the public and the professionals became accountable for their expertise and professional skills. Barnett (2008: 190) elaborates this challenge in his description of the 'liquid' and 'supercomplex' world where knowledge, understandings, and skills are changing all the time and are evaluated continuously by the client's satisfaction of the service. Both Eraut (1994) and Barnett (2008) assert that marketisation and 'shopping around for services' (Barnett, 2008: 191-192) transformed the notion of 'service' from being 'profession-centred' (inspired by

trust, responsibility for public good and altruism) to 'client-centred' (manipulated by the clients' rights and social power). Power (1997) concludes that conflicts arising from social and political power increased accountability measures and introduced excessive managerialism through political regulations by governments. Performance management procedures overly increased performativity measures in organisations to foster a sense of responsibility and professionalism in professionals in their efforts to achieve institutional success (Green, 2009). Green recognises the necessity of performance management measures that are applied by managers to guard professional accountability (2009). However, Green and Cribb (1998: 22-23) contend that the indirect threats those measures posed to job stability and work ethos had detrimental effects on professional responsibility and human agency. According to them, professional responsibility was reduced from ethics and 'effective caring' towards public welfare to the ability of doing things effectively; the notion of professional responsibility became 'ethically empty'.

A contemporary definition of professionalism in education

Considering the above, differences in needs and understandings led to lack of consensus in the meaning of professionalism (Fox, 1992; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996; Freidson, 1994).

Contemporary meanings of professionalism highlight the influence of social, political and economic contexts, and there seems to be a consensus now over professionalism 'being an externally imposed, articulated perception of what lies within the parameters of a profession's collective remit and responsibilities' (Evans, 2008: 4) – a definition that corroborates the views of conflict theory and the current global change.

As such, Evans warns that this external imposition could lead professionalism to remain an 'ideal' that fails to become an enacted functional reality resulting from external and internal real observations in the field. According to Evans, this imposition renders professionalism a fake or a distorted image, that does not reflect the real situation. It seems to have become a model prescribed by specialists and external agencies, demanded officially by occupational workgroups and imposed by authorities through performativity measures and privatisation monopolies that govern recent education policies (Ball, 2008). Therefore, Troman (1996) and others (Ozaga,1995; Gleeson *et al.*,

2001) maintain that professionalism was, and continues to be socially constructed and redefined due to the historically on-going influence of context, policy and interests of various groups in the society. Likewise, Crook (2008: 23) contends that professionalism remains 'an artificial construct with ever-changing and always-contested definitions and traits', what Whitty (2008: 32) calls a 'shifting phenomenon".

In education, Helsby (1995) highlights the significant role teachers play in the social construction of professionalism. This significance is described by Boyt et al. (2001) as the ability of teachers to exert influence on their work through their attitudes and behaviours. This influence, however, is a variant factor since the level of influence would depend on the nature and degree of professional qualities in the behaviours and attitudes that teachers possess. This variance resonates also with Rueschemeyer's (1962) rejection of the functionalist theory's assumption that professionals are expected to have a systematic commitment in serving their communities and sustaining altruism in the societies, especially if communities were historically and culturally different. Similarly, Ozga's (1995: 35) view of the need to contextualise professionalism 'particularly in policy context' confirms Johnson's critique of the functionalist theory in its exclusion of the power dimension of institutions and society represented by authorities and clients. Ozga sees professionalism as 'a form of control on the occupation members to monitor 'the quality of service' provided by the professionals (p. 35).

Regardless of the traditional or postmodern nature of the definitions that are proposed for professionalism, Boyt et al. (2001), Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) and many others (Freidson, 1994; Johnson, 1972; Sachs, 1999), agree that professionalism is expressed by the following central dimensions: their skills and theoretical/specialist knowledge; their adherence to a professional code of conduct and self-regulation which determines their responsibility and accountability towards their profession and their clients; their relationship with the clients based on trust; their autonomy and altruism directed towards the public good. Day (1999: 13) considers the membership of professionals in their occupation leads them to having a 'consensus of norms' they adhere to while carrying out their roles 'within personal, organizational and broader political conditions'. This, Evans (2008: 8) argues, could be understood as 'a collective notion … a plurality shared by many' that founds the professional culture. Hoyle and Wallace (2005) consider this plurality that connects school teachers and leaders as

members in the teaching profession and in schools as institution allows them to establish a professional culture in their schools. Hence, they define a professional culture to be shared as 'a configuration of beliefs, practices, relationships, language and symbols distinctive to a particular social unit' (p 103). Linking Hoyle and Wallace's definition of professional culture to that of professionalism: 'the identification and expression of what is required and expected of members of a profession' (p. 103), Evans (2008) considers that professional culture is a big constituent of professionalism.

The above shows the significance of knowledge, autonomy and professional responsibility in educational practice. It also shows that improving the level of professionalism of professionals requires the ability to identify and emphasise their individual characteristics, for which Evans (2008) suggests the term: professionality (Hoyle, 1975). While Evans considers professionalism to be a functional concept in that it relates to the behaviour of professionals, she defines 'professionality' to be concerned with the attitudes of those professionals which she describes as 'an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which s/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice (pp 6-7).

I next examine the notion of professionalisation, to explore further the relationship between professionalism, professionality and developing the professional practice of school principals, the focus of my study, in relation to their career progress.

Professionalisation and professional development of school principals

Hargreaves and Goodson (1996: 4) define professionalisation as the 'social and political project or mission designed to enhance the interests of an occupational group'. A more contextualized definition of professionalisation is proposed by Macpherson (2009) in his study of leadership development for Australian education systems. He defines the process of professionalisation as 'mastering a specialist, validated and reliable knowledge base, demonstrably acquiring the practical skills of the field, being socialised into the culture of the body of people engaged in the calling, and adhering to the principles and ethics of best practice in that profession (p. 54). Hence, culture becomes the contextual landscape comprised of, represented and identified by time people and place, that contributes to the formation of professionals. As such, professionals influence

the landscape in which they establish their practice, while being influenced by it. Overall, Hoyle and Wallace (2005) explain that professionalisation is the training and development route by which occupations can gradually become accepted as professions, once they have attained the characteristics of professionalism discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, within their social, political and institutional contexts, regardless of teachers and school leaders having the autonomy and control to influence their professional roles, Evans (2008) contends that professional development, as a form of new professionalism, discounts or diminishes their much-aspired autonomy and control over their work. This is evident in the recent change in worldwide economy and work force preparation. The rapid wide-ranging restructuring of economies globally changed the political, social, economic and organisational contexts of work occupations and labour force in the public sector (Troman, 1996; Ozga, 1995; Beck, 2008). The organisational context of education was no exception, as market-led forces (marketisation) and privatisation intensified the work and accountability of teachers and school leaders and increased the governments' and public's demands of their performativity to meet the planned ends despite limited, often scarce, resources and controlled prescribed means (ibid).

With regards to education reform, Whitty (2008), Ball (2008) and Evans (2008) explain that the global movement of education reform led many countries' governments to devise policies that introduced professionalisation to enhance the professional practice of teachers, school leaders, administrators and support staff. Those new policies, however, imposed increased measures to control performativity and accountability towards achieving the targets of the reform process. Government and public critique of performance standards in schools targeted the autonomy of teachers and leaders and pushed schools in a market-based competition with the private sector influenced by public (consumer) choice, alongside the privatisation of educational services. The paradox of 'market forces and state control' challenged the whole educational process in schools: it resulted in a standardised and prescribed curriculum and tests, enforced control on the schools' operational systems and the teaching process (Whitty, 2008, p. 35). The increasing performativity shifted the power away from the professionals (Evans,

2008) and led to excessive managerialism that reduced further school leaders' and teachers' autonomy (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; Ball, 2008; Whitty, 2008).

Furthermore, according to Hatcher (1994), managerialism influenced the organisational culture by amplifying control over performance through re-formulating employment conditions and re-designing job descriptions. Additionally, setting ambitious targets in educational outcomes and streamlining the financial costs led to re-professionalisation. The roles and functions of principals, teachers, administrators and teacher assistants were re-defined according to the restructuring of the educational project. Moreover, now in many parts of the world, teachers are expected to comply with managerial professionalism in their schools, as educational authorities and school principals decide on behalf of them 'what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess students' in compliance with the directives determined by the school and national authorities 'rather than by the teachers themselves' (Whitty, 2008: 29, Ball, 2008). Where in some countries, governments applied self-management of schools, school principals had greater autonomy in certain operational and financial areas, however, they were restricted by their accountability to the government and the public as their clients. Hoyle and Wallace (2005) regarded this sort of development a de-professionalisation. Barbor (2005), promoted his concept of 'informed professionalism': a professional formation model that re-professionalises teachers through measurable professional knowledge and expertise to obtain a 'licensed autonomy'. Unlike Barbor (2005), Dainton (2005) questions the compatibility of the process in which teachers 'deliver someone else's thoughts, ideas, strategies, and lessons plans' with the concept of informed professionalism described above. Green (2009: 116) confirms Dainton's view when she implies the de-professionalisation of the practitioner in becoming a 'service provider' who delivers someone else's targets. Similarly, Troman (1996: 474) saw that this process was a de-professionalisation of the practitioners to become 'official technicists'.

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