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# Issues of professionalism and teachers: critical observations from research and the literature

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**Abstract**   The concept of 'professionalism' has become more evident in discourse about teacher quality in recent years. In fact, in some contexts 'professionalism' is used as a euphemism for quality and reform. This critical essay applies a critical theory perspective and discusses notions of educational professionalism from the academic literature. It draws on research findings about teachers' understandings of the diverse ways the term 'professionalism' is used in discussions of teacher quality, and highlights three key assumptions that appear to underpin contemporary 'professionalism' discourses. It suggests that the reification of 'professionalism' may have had a number of regrettable consequences for teachers, and challenges the apparent lack of evidence that links 'professionalism', however it might be defined, with quality educational outcomes. The essay concludes by arguing that the emergence of 'professionalism' as a signifier of quality has served to obscure and confuse many other important issues concerning the quality of teaching.

**Keywords**   Professionalism · Teachers · Professional development · Professional learning · Professionalisation · Standards

## Introduction

This critical essay begins with a brief review of the professionalism literature which highlights the ways in which the term 'professionalism' is used in educational discourses. It presents an overview of a doctoral research project that highlighted the impact of the use of the terms associated with professionalism for a set of early childhood teachers working in K-2 classrooms in a state education department. A

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critical theory approach is then applied to this information to critique and challenge what has been revealed. This is followed by a discussion of three key assumptions regarding professionalism and a critique of the manifestation of 'professionalism' in education. Concluding observations, drawn from the literature and research findings, employ a critical theory perspective to question the reification of professionalism and note the unintended consequences for teachers and schools.

Educational stakeholders have focused on improving student learning outcomes, employing both the standards-based and outcomes-based educational paradigms (Ravitch 2010). One strategy for achieving this aim emphasises the quality of teaching and learning activities and aligns quality teaching with professional development (Evans 2008). In the Australian context, this attention to what teachers do intensified at the beginning of the new millennium, with the introduction of a program that focussed on quality teaching, the *Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme* (AGQTP) (Department of Education Science and Training [DEST] 2002). The state of New South Wales addressed the expectation for improved teaching quality through mechanisms such as the use of the *Quality Teacher Framework* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003) and more recently with a raft of new policies, including *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* (available at: http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/news/greatteaching/index.php). At the national level, the federal government has introduced the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011). The burden of improved teacher quality is not limited to the Australian context though, with other western nations also focussing on it as a mechanism to improve student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond 2010). The aspiration of 'professionalising' the teaching workforce so that current and pre-service teachers will achieve 'quality' teaching and learning through targeted professional development activities (PD) is evident in media articles as well as academic discourse (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009; Hattie 2009; Lynch et al. 2014).

In this context of heightened emphasis on teaching quality and educational improvements, this critical essay evaluates tenuous links between teacher professionalism and a raft of educational reform initiatives. This essay draws its critique and observations from a qualitative research study that investigated early childhood teachers' understandings about change in the workplace (Johnston 2012; Overton 2006, 2009). One of the key findings of that study, which is noted for discussion, here relates to the differing uses of the term 'professional' in educational contexts. This includes disparate understandings about: the construct of professionalism; the quality of teaching and teacher quality; having and being given professional development and/or professional learning (PD/PL); and the professionalisation of the teaching workforce. A summary of this research is included below.

Hilferty (2008), noted that teacher professionalism is a social construct "that is being defined and redefined through educational theory, policy and practice" (p. 53). This essay does not set out to define what is meant by the use of the terms 'professional', 'professionalism' or 'being professional'. Rather it acknowledges the range of uses for the terms that are evident in the literature, and the complications when engaging in shared and meaningful discourse about professionalism in the contexts of improving the quality of teaching.

## Professionalism in the literature

The following is an overview of professionalism literature as it is used in educational discourse. It highlights that professionalism is a contested area of study that is associated with the expectation of improved standards of teaching (Dalli and Urban 2013; Lynch et al. 2014; Urban 2010).

As discussed above, no absolute definitions are sought or given in this essay; rather it acknowledges the conflated and shifting nature of the use of the terms. Evans (2008) affirmed that there is a direct connection between 'professional culture' and 'professionalism' in much of the research and literature. Professionalism, though, goes beyond 'culture', that is, having shared ideologies and understandings of the nature of teaching tasks, to a deeper awareness of the norms of being a professional. There is a raft of understandings linked to the term 'professional'. Some of the ways in which the term is applied to educational discourse include: being a 'professional', having or demonstrating 'professionalism', the 'professionalisation' of the work force, and engaging with ongoing 'professional development'.

On the issue of definition of the term(s), Sachs (2001, p. 150) notes that: "definitions of 'professionalism', what constitutes a profession and so on, have been sites of academic and ideological struggle between union leaders, bureaucrats and academics that are currently being played out in a variety of settings". In acknowledging this though she fails to mention teacher involvement in the process of resolving the struggles over shared understandings about issues of professionalism. Rather, she notes that the stakeholders—academics, unions and bureaucrats—claim they are "acting in the best interests of teachers individually and collectively" (Sachs 2001, p. 150). However, this process may actively negate the teachers' 'voice' and contribute to additional angst for teachers.

Expanding on the definitions, Sachs (2001) goes on to consider two types of discourses of professionalism—managerial and democratic—linking these with the notion of a professional identity. She considers professional identity to be "a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself" (p. 153). This template for a professional identity is developed and maintained by members of the teaching profession. The application of this professional identity though often presents as a form of control (Ingersoll 2003b), that is dictated by others, yet is still about individual teacher's practice and sense of identity.

Corcoran (1995) also views professional development as a form of control when he links the need for higher standards of teaching practice with the call to improve the quality of professional development efforts. Interestingly that observation preceded Australia's introduction of the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011) by some 15 years. The implicit assumption in Corcoran's view is that teachers' current "skills and responsibilities" and "practice" (Corcoran 1995, p. 1) is in some way not acceptable. Thus, with the "raising of expectations" there has been a perception that educational standards–and their attending student outcomes—have been falling and therefore staff must undergo "these reform initiatives" in order to redress the poor quality of teaching and learning.

There are many examples in the literature of concerns for standards in education and equally as many solutions which have been posited. The notion of a crisis in literacy or in education (Berliner and Biddle 1995; Ohanian 1999) is not new and has been a recurrent theme in some social and educational discourses (Brock 1998; Darling-Hammond 2010). The interrelated inferences are: that educational standards need to be raised; that there need to be improvements in the quality of education; and that teachers ought to be improved in some way, and made more professional. Teachers, schools and education in general are frequently portrayed as the cause of poor national economic productivity in a simplified cause-and-effect scenario (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2012; Marginson 1999). Teachers teach poorly and so students fail to learn. However if teachers taught better, presumably delivering 'quality education' in a 'world class education' system, (Hardy and Boyle 2011; Wilson 2008) then improvements in student learning outcomes—as measured by standardised tests—would be the result (Ravitch 2010). These links with improved student outcomes are tenuous but frequently observed—that if all students learned what they should, unemployment issues would be solved, the economy would be more productive and life in general would improve (Darling-Hammond 2010; Ingersoll 2003b; Ingvarson et al. 2006). This kind of simplistic logic has relevance because it explicitly links the quality of teaching with professional development, teacher autonomy and trust, and importantly with how teachers see themselves in the public eye (Evans 2008). Being implicated with social and economic woes is a burden that teachers are expected to bear (Dinham Feb 28th 2013).

This discourse implies that reform and restructuring will happen with greater ease through improved professional development programs. Thus teachers will be better equipped for quality teaching, and the problems associated with falling standards will be resolved. This raft of assertions around educational crises, falling standards and poor teaching, though, has been challenged as a set of urban myths (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman 2012; Pring 2006; Ravitch 2010; Sahlberg 2011). The linear and simplistic equation provides the panacea for educational problems. Premised on social assumptions that could be considered to be lacking in researched reality, generic educational reform to professionalise teachers, improve the quality of student experiences and seemingly resolve the issues of low standards in education are then possible. The reality, it appears, it far more complex (Servage 2009). More information on assumptions is provided below.

In considering what it means to *be* professional, Maeroff (1989) noted teachers' desire to be treated like professionals is linked to the degree of autonomy and respect from the profession and the community (Pearson and Moomaw 2005). Pearson and Moomaw (2005) though, noted that this is not something that teachers can do for themselves, but rather something that is done *to* or *for* them. In this scenario, teachers are trusted by their employer and their community, respected for their knowledge, skills and values and trusted to value students' needs. They are given autonomy to make decisions on how best to establish and maintain a professional teaching pedagogy that enhances learning for their students. It appears that some education systems are able to achieve this goal, but not all systems (Darling-Hammond 2010; Sahlberg 2011).

The notion of a code of practice and teacher/teaching standards that articulate what it means to *be* professional is also acknowledged in the literature when Stronach et al. (2001) discuss the "inside-out, outside-in riddle". They see that there are two forms of professionalism: "'inside-out' professionalism resting on Aristotelian qualities [of a virtuous person], and 'outside-in' professionalism which relied on the prior specification of rules and procedures" (Stronach et al. 2001, p. 17). The idea is that one can be labelled as 'professional' if one fits a set of criteria concerning knowledge of the profession itself, has a set of designated 'virtuous' characteristics, and follows a set of rules as a code of conduct. Some of these criteria are set by stakeholders outside the classroom and others are determined by the 'person-ality' (Stronach et al. 2001, p.17) or character of the teacher. Thus, the power to determine whether teachers are deemed to be 'professional' in their behaviour and teaching pedagogy is often assigned to those who are outside the classroom and distant from classroom practice. This distance and 'outside-ness' is evident in Australian contexts with the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011), which asserts that these professional standards are a "public statement" that define the work of teachers and will:

> Result in improved educational outcomes for students …. by providing a framework that makes clear the knowledge, practice and *professional* engagement required across teachers' careers. …. Teacher standards also inform the development of *professional* learning goals, provide a framework by which teachers can judge the success of their learning and assist self-reflection and self-assessment. … Standards contribute to the *professionalisation* of teaching and raise the status of the *profession*. (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership ([AITSL] 2011, p. 1) homepage; italics added).

While providing some clarity about what being professional may be, it could be argued that the implementation of a set of professional standards for teachers also narrows the perception and 'appearance' of professionality. Likewise what is not discernible in the discourse is the research or evidence basis, and/or evaluation of the development and implementation of these standards. Articulating how having a set of professional standards for teachers will effect improvements in student learning outcomes would be anticipated, yet this information is left unstated.

In the early childhood sector, an increased focus on 'professionalism' has been evident since the first years of the new millennium (Dalli and Urban 2013). (Dalli and Urban 2013 also note that the "terminology of each childhood professionalism in increasingly pervasive" (p. 2) and they explore its use as a conceptual and policy issue as well as a 'discourse'. Research in this area is ongoing (Cohen 2013; Harwood et al. 2012) and, while many claims are made, there is evidence of critical evaluation of discourses (Clark 2012; Duhn 2011).

Harris (1997) provided a review of issues and suggests a 'new professionalism' (Harris 1997, p. 61) that moves the traditional notion of what it means to be 'professional' to a revised conception for the term. She claims that this "has to embrace and encompass the potential for individuals to manage discontinuous and

fragmentary social change", allowing teachers the "scope for individual professional response or behaviour" (Harris 1997 p. 61). This view of teachers' work as "practical action informed by knowledge and judgement" is incompatible with "the technical–rational view of teaching" (Harris 1997 p. 62). Thus, she asserts conceptions of professionalism are changing. She identifies this as a change from a technical—rationalist model of professionalism to one which embraces the "conception of the reflective practitioner, whose knowledge is directly constructed through engagement with problems encountered in the field and built through successive stages of hypothesizing, testing and reflection" (Harris 1997, p. 62).

This change in understanding about professionalism is also noted by (Fenech et al. 2010) when they see the "loose application of the term 'professional'" (p. 90) in early childhood contexts, but note that the term's use "is confined to objective technical, practices" (Fenech et al. 2010, p. 89). Once again this links professionalism to issues of power, when what is determined as 'professional/ism'—how teachers and teaching is perceived outside of the classroom—becomes a potential site of conflict for teachers.

Servage (2009) notes that, "the 'professional' qualifier is very much subject to interpretation" (p. 164), and so, arriving at a common understanding of what is meant by these terms is complex (Helterbran 2008; Hoyle 1997). Analysing the underlying interpretations and implications is equally difficult (Evans 2008). Perhaps the most difficult issue is the ways in which the concepts and assumptions are conflated into the term 'professionalism', thus rendering invisible many of the related issues and concerns.

The next section gives an overview of the research which has prompted this critically reflective essay. The essay then goes on to further analysis and critique of the information.

## Overview of the research project

The qualitative research that initiated this critical essay investigated teachers' understandings about how educational change impacted them. This research illustrates and provides empirical substance for the points made in this essay. Most notably the research findings highlight the ways in which the use of the term 'professional'–and its various iterations–are reified and inappropriately connected and conflated to quality teaching and learning.

Detail about the research is overviewed in papers published elsewhere (Johnston 2013; Overton 2006, 2009) but is summarised here. The research employed a critical case study approach (Yin 2009) and used the concept of *identity* to investigate the deeper personal and professional implications of change. Initially focussing on how changes in literacy teaching impacted teachers, the study broadened to include other kinds of educational changes that the teachers noted as important to them. Participants were recruited through open invitation to Education Department teachers in seven schools. Data were gathered through two sets of open-ended interviews (Kvale 1996) from eight early childhood teachers working in

Kindergarten to year two primary school contexts in the state education system in Tasmania, Australia.

The data were analysed using a three-tiered approach. The first level of analysis utilised a narrative approach (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Polkinghorne 1988), storying the interviews and the teachers' experiences of change. This summarised the information and provided background understandings about each of the teachers. The second level of analysis interrogated the data using a grounded theory approach (Charmez 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1999) and arrived at three themes of *change*, *power* and *identity*, with their accompanying categories and sub-categories, one of which related to issues of professionalism. Expanding on this analysis, the third level of analysis employed a discourse analytic approach (Wetherall et al. 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2001) and used Gee's (1999) framework of 18 analytical questions, in conjunction with the research questions, to develop additional understandings from the teachers' perceptions of their identities in contexts of change.

The key findings noted the interrelated issues of teacher professionalism, the actions of the education system towards teachers, and the relationship between teachers' identity and change. Significantly different perceptions had formed around issues of professionalism in the educational and bureaucratic systems (Helterbran 2008; Servage 2009). The study evidenced the ways in which the actions of the educational system shape the value that teachers assign to themselves and their working lives and corroded teachers' sense of value to their employer. In contexts of ongoing educational change, these teachers experienced some degree of personal and professional uncertainty and instability. This put the teachers at risk of eroding the residual goodwill that existed between teachers and the education system. Marked disparities in how issues of professionalism were understood also placed teachers in a position of uncertainty and conflict, and created the need for self-protective behaviours on their part. In turn, this provided the conditions whereby teachers' commitment to teaching tasks was diminished which has direct implications for teacher effectiveness and student learning (Overton 2006).

The next section gives more detail on how the use of professionalism terms were evident in the research and highlights five ways that 'professionalism' was evident in these teachers' working lives.

## Issues of professionalism from research

In the research study summarised above, the focus on being 'professional', the 'professionalisation' of teaching through more and improved 'professional development' activities has been evidenced in teachers' observations. Five key areas regarding professionalism can be noted from the study. These are outlined below and then used as the basis for critical observations in the following sections.

Firstly, teachers in this study were aware that the term 'professional' was associated with raising teacher and teaching standards through 'professionalising' the tasks of teaching—that is, making pre-service, in-service and beginning teachers more professional, for, and elevating the status of teaching as a career (Hursh 2000;

Ingvarson 1998; Overton 2006). One of the research participants, Suzanne,[1] when discussing the additional work that seemed to be required as a result of recent school reform processes, considered that this came in the form of professional development expectations, and was not optional: *"So most of the stuff, the extra work, is being forced on you through professional development."* (Suzanne, Transcript 1, p. 2). Sally, another participant, could also see that she was doing "*heaps more assessment-type stuff for the Department*" (T1,p.2) and the amount and duplication of this work bothered her. "*I think we do heaps more assessment type stuff for the Department. Um, and even though those tools can be useful in what you're doing in the classroom as well you usually have to duplicate*" (Sally, T1, p. 2).

While teachers could see that 'professionalising' teaching and teachers could improve student learning outcomes, there was an awareness that it would imply some forms of increased monitoring of them and their teaching (Ingersoll 2003b; Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1994; Pearson and Moomaw 2005). Drawing on the research data, Katrina (research participant), recognised that professional development was the conduit for a variation in teaching roles and responsibilities and resulted in the imposition of additional tasks. Now she needed to concentrate more on "prescribed tasks" than on her relationship with her students.

> We're distanced from the relationship with the children. Because we're so busy having to do these prescribed tasks a lot of the fun has been … I've heard other teachers say that too… that a lot of the fun has been taken out of the classroom because we're so pressured to achieve this baseline data (Katrina, T1, p. 5).

She went on to note that this was at odds with what she understood to be the core task of her job. Her professional identity dictated that the relationship with her students was important, but change meant that she was not able to give this the time that she felt she ought. This meant her professional integrity was compromised and it created uncertainty and conflict for her.

The 'professionalisation' of teaching and what it means for teachers to have their work 'professionalised' had repercussions for teachers themselves, for expectations of behaviour and accountability, and, for their status in the community (Overton 2009; Servage 2009). Conflicts in the expectations and understandings about teachers' roles were evident in the teachers' talk, for example:

> I'm collecting data for the purpose of something outside of what my role I believe as a teacher should be. I believe my role as a teacher should be about trying to improve things for the kids in my classroom. Yeah, so I do find that sort of thing very frustrating, doing jobs that are more … I almost think they are office administration (Sally, T1, p. 3).

As noted by (Pearson and Moomaw 2005), there is an embedded assumption that teachers cannot be trusted to do their jobs and that they need to be 'managed', and given more PD/PL which will improve the standards of teaching. Their work will be more closely monitored to ensure accountability and greater levels of professionalism

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[1] Participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms .

(Avalos 2011). This directly links to issues of professional trust and teacher autonomy (Pearson and Moomaw 2005; Sahlberg 2011).

Similarly the study found that these teachers were aware that being professional also implied being involved in further 'professional development' programs—that is, teaching teachers more about teaching and keeping them abreast of current innovations (Little 1994; Smyth 2001). As noted in the literature (Hardy 2009; Helterbran 2008) these teachers were aware that the expectation and justification that they would undertake 'professional' development (PD)/learning (PL) sent subtle messages about their existing professional knowledge. More than half of the participants noted, and some quite strongly, that this expectation implied that they were in some ways lacking in professional knowledge and/or its accurate application (Overton 2006). Suzanne noted that, when new policies with professional development were disseminated, her response was:

> after all these years … Every time something new comes in I probably shrug my shoulders and say "Oh, again?" because I've been through so many. I mean I've seen the circles come and go. But now we've got to the point where they're really trying to define what they're trying to do, aren't they, with the outcomes and that. But they're always trying to adapt it so I mean it's sort of like you never get it right (Suzanne, T1, p. 2).

Goodson noted (2000) that this inference about lack of professional knowledge cut to the core of quality teaching and professionalism, because the presumption was that by engaging in PD/PL the problems will be resolved (Goodson 2000). For these teachers this was a serious consequence and, while they acknowledged the benefits of additional, apposite PD, it clearly challenged them regarding what it is to be a good or professional teacher (Clandinin and Connelly 1996).

The study identified that these teachers were aware that the expectation for being more professional was probably driven by agenda that were external to the school or classroom; that is, that there were political implications underpinning the educational reforms (Smyth 2002) and that it was to some degree or another related to power and control of the profession (Corcoran 1995; Overton 2009). When discussion the expectations of professional development, Georgie noted

> …if I take something on myself, and I take on lots of things, then I enjoy them but if it's imposed on me and I don't really see the relevance of it then I'll feel overloaded and I don't like it. If it's something that we are made to do, then you sit there and think … (Georgie, T1, p. 12).

Georgie also acknowledged: "*Yeah, people feel a little bit put upon or they feel as though once they go to a PD session and they have to start it straight away or they are not given any time to sort of follow it up.* (Georgie, T2, p. 7).

The study showed that these teachers demonstrated awareness of the valuing of certain knowledge in professional development and learning activities. They subtly questioned who was controlling what teachers ought to learn when becoming 'more professional', and why this learning was positioned as valuable, to whom, and for what reasons (Bernstein 1996; Ingersoll 2003b; Overton 2006; Wilson and Berne 1999). Thus they were applying a critical perspective to these issues.

And finally, these teachers showed awareness that being 'a professional' related to and affirmed one's professional teacher identity (Sachs 2001; Sachs et al. 1996). There was an expectation that teachers should be more 'professional' but that this has repercussions for how teachers saw themselves in the course of their daily working lives (Overton 2006). One recognised but unintended consequence of much of this process of professionalisation was that, for the teachers in this study, somehow they and their work are not quite good enough (Maeroff 1989; Overton 2006; Sachs 2001). Suzanne, a self-confessed rebel, was conflicted about the meaning and use of the term professional:

> I don't like the word professional because of the implication that professional means that you're a goody, goody two shoes, which is a bad way of saying it, and that there's a certain way to be professional and it's sort of … it's sort of labelling you as a person who fits a mould instead of, instead of … oh what's the word?… It's devaluing me as an individual, it's … I don't want to be unprofessional either. I want to be someone of integrity and someone who cares about children and, and in that way I want to bring my own way of, my personal… I mean the way I operate. I don't want to operate in a way that isn't me and sometimes I see a difference between what people see as professional and the way I want to be. … if someone says that person is professional to me it doesn't tell me anything. It doesn't tell me about the person…. (Suzanne, T2, pp. 2–3).

This professional self-esteem and teacher identity issue also related to issues regarding teacher appraisal and teacher accountability, issues that continue to be at the forefront of educational discourse (Nadelson et al. 2012).

Thus there are complexities and a multi-dimensional layering of these issues that can be garnered from this study. It provided insights into the unintended consequences, challenges and implications for teachers in the moves towards greater levels of professionalism which merit discussion and analysis.

The next section builds on this research basis and notes three key assumptions that are made in the discourses of professionalism, challenging their foundational logic, and is followed by analysis and critique.

## Three key assumptions

'Achievement, accountability and assessment' have been referred to as 'the three As' in education (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009) and Helterbran (2008) asserts they have been driving the impetus for quality, standards and the professionalisation of teaching. The three As are implicit in the discourse of professionalism (Evans 2008) because it is assumed that, as teachers are more accountable through a heavier focus on student assessment and aceheivement, they will be more professional. This essay asserts that critical evaluation of the ways in which professionalism is conflated with quality teaching through the use of the constructs of achievement, accountability and assessment is warranted. It seeks to contest these Foucaultian "discourses of

power" (Hindess 1996) that appear from the research and literature as unchallenged assumptions. Thus, three key assumptions regarding the professionalisation of the teaching workforce have been noted and deserve discussion. These assumptions are:

**Assumption 1** *Professionalism* is the same as/equals *quality*; so, by reifying 'professionalism' (Apple 1995) through a focus on improved teaching standards and practices, the quality of teachers and their teaching practice will improve.

**Assumption 2** *Professionalism* is the same as/equals *reform*; so, to professionalise the workforce and to act to ensure that teachers will be more professional is a reform process that guarantees improvements to teachers' teaching practices and pedagogies (Smyth 2006).

**Assumption 3** *Professionalism*, as 'reform' and as 'quality', is the same as/equals *guaranteed improvement* in both the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes; that the processes of professionalising the teaching workforce will reform teaching practices and therefore lead to improvement in student learning outcomes.

As noted, while this may seem like a simplistic, common-sense sequence of reform events, what appears to be absent in this equation is a research-basis for the assumptions and critical debate and evaluation. This critical essay aspires to stimulate such debate. Research that shows either correlation or causation between improved student leaning outcomes and the professionalisation of the teaching workforce as a reform process is not evident in the discourse. While there is research showing impact of specific programs, innovations, initiatives and interventions, the more generic research bases for claims of improved student outcome *through* professionalisation of teachers is not evident (Wallace 2009). Thus, it appears that these kinds of assertions have a severely compromised logic and are based on assumptions rather than evidence.

Synthesising information from the research project and the literature, the next section applies further analysis and critiques these contexts, concluding with observations on the situation.

## Analysis and critique

This section continues the analysis and critiques the information garnered from the literature and from the research findings. It presents key points for discussion and critique based on a critical theory perspective (Anyon 2009; Kincheloe 2008; Kincheloe and McLaren 2002). Critical theory asserts a disruptive perspective that challenges discourses and power relationships. In educational contexts, it seeks "critical empowerment rather than subjugation" (Kincheloe and McLaren 2002, p. 89) devising questions that explore and challenge assumptions. This critique seeks to empower through this kind of evaluation.

Firstly, what is not explicitly evident in the discourse is the *why* of the push for improved professionalism. Critical theorists seeks social justice by analysing competing power interests, and questions of *why* are implicit in that analysis (Anyon 2009), as well as seeking possible solutions to perceived problems. While teachers

affirm that they wish to be considered to be professionals, that is, aligned with doctors, dentists and lawyers in their career status (Sachs 2001), and are generally happy to be accountable for their teaching actions (Ingersoll 2003a), there appear to be simultaneous challenges to the elevation of the status of the profession (Evans 2008; Malm 2009). Increasing teachers' levels of professionalism seems like a logical and sensible move, but one that is convoluted and more significantly, lacking in an evidentiary basis for improving student learning outcomes (Dinham Feb 28th 2013).

Governments in Australia are increasing the emphasis on teacher accountability for student learning outcomes (Dinham et al. 2008) through such initiatives as the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011). While the set of professional standards for teachers has provided boundaries and explicit expectations (Nadelson et al. 2012) it simultaneously acts to de-value and de-professionalised teachers because it reduces professional autonomy and hints at a lack of professional trust and respect for what teachers do (Servage 2009). As governments involve themselves more in the processes, policies, practices and funding for education, the mixed messages, confused agendas and funding crises render teachers and students the lab rats of political imperatives (Ravitch 2010). It also begs the question regarding whether students' and teachers' needs and interests are being served or even considered, and about whether and how teachers can be trusted to do the jobs they are employed to do (Louis 2007). So it seems that the cohesive, evidence-based case for PD/PL to enhance student leaning outcomes for teachers is absent. Thus, applying a critical theory perspective to these issues results in challenges to what is otherwise considered unproblematic assumptions in these discourses of power.

Secondly, when applying a critical theory approach to analysis, the issues of power, disempowerment and subjugation, and empowerment are all areas for analysis. So when analysing the information presented here, it can be noted that despite the difficulties with professionalising the workforce there can be a sense of empowerment garnered by teachers who actively engage in PD/PL (Pearson and Moomaw 2005). Through knowledge and improved skill levels, some have affirmed the elusive gains in student learning outcomes (Avalos 1997; Lynch et al. 2014; Stevenson 2012). This sense of agency and empowerment for teachers is sorely lacking in some education departments (Overton 2009), but clearly evident in others (Sahlberg 2011). As Dinham (Feb 28th 2013) notes there are questions raised regarding the processes for implementation of professional standards, and how and whether further targeted professional development/learning can act to empower teachers. Since critical theory "is centered on the function of criticism and its ability to advance research on the nature of oppression and emancipation" (Leonardo 2004, p. 11) any such challenge to the *status quo* is aimed at creating emancipatory knowledge. In this instance that emancipatory knowledge can be achieved through educational critique and debate.

Thirdly, it appears there is the potential for the growth in the sub-industry for provision of required PD/PL (Evans 2008). Thus, a critical theory perspective questions whose interests are served in this action and it appears that, for some entrepreneurs, an economic benefit is available. While this service provision may be necessary for teachers and education systems as accountability and teacher appraisal

are expedited, it also raises the questions concerning what knowledge and skills are valued (Wallace 2009); whether this PD/PL is individualised for teachers' needs (Malm 2009; Vukelich and Wrenn 1999) or whether it is system and policy driven; and how that provision and the outcomes on student learning are measured and evaluated. Whose interests are served in this process, and whose are protected from abuse. Thus, more questions are raised than answered when applying critical theory to these issues.

Two further questions come to light from analysis of this elevation of the need for more professionalism and quality in teaching and learning. One question interrogates the impact on teachers, with pragmatic and operational notions regarding how any such PD/PL that will illusively improve teachers and their students learning outcomes (Day and Sachs 2004). It would be affirming to know that government bodies are actively researching the impacts on stakeholders of these drives for professionalisation of the teaching workforce.

Additionally, there are concerns that question what kind of new knowledge is needed for teachers to achieve the goals of improved student learning outcomes and looks for the research that shows which knowledge produces which learning outcome improvements. There is an implicit assumption that the new knowledge would be the same for all teachers (Van Driel and Berry 2012). This assumes that: each teacher has a consistent set of knowledge; that all teachers need a particular set of new knowledge; and/or that someone has researched to determine which teachers have/do not have certain knowledge that is essential for the improvement of student learning outcomes. Then it presumes that the new knowledge/professional learning is tailored to each teacher for their for specific needs and focus (Opfer and Pedder 2011). It would appear that teachers are considered to be a homogenous group of people rather than a set of individuals with diverse learning needs and knowledge bases. More critique and challenge to these presumptions are needed.

Furthermore, in the context of ongoing educational reform, there is the issue of the rights and responsibilities of stakeholders—the education systems, the PD/PL service providers, the students, their parents, and researchers investigating the outcomes, and even the media's response to such focus (Stevenson 2012). Since these reform efforts never occur in a vacuum (Pring 2006) there ought to be debate and analysis of these policies, processes and their products (Bruder et al. 2009) as they relate to the stakeholders.. The professional and moral rights and responsibilities of the stakeholders are rarely considered in such reforms. The reform occurs and systems move forward. The challenge is for analysis of the impacts and outcomes (Pring 2006). Yet because these are driven by political agenda, the key players and instigators are rarely there at the end to critically evaluate or respond to research data from the reform..

**Final observations**

In drawing this discussion to a close, it is assumed that the drive towards greater professionalisation of the teaching workforce is emanating from political agenda (Lofty 2003). It could be considered to have negative and unintended consequences

such as the de-professionalisation of education, the withdrawal of teachers' goodwill in the tasks of teaching, and the lack of professional and community trust and autonomy for teachers (Overton 2006, 2009; Ozanne 1997). It is however acknowledged that there is much benefit in effectively managed professional development and programs to improve the quality of both teachers and teaching (Dinham Feb 28th 2013; Johnston 2013; Murray April 13th 2012).

What does not appear in the literature is a consideration or acknowledgement that there are the costs to teachers and therefore to education in general. The simplistic model of provision of PD/PL as a mechanism for building generic depth and strength into teachers' practice fails to accommodate for the complexities of leading change in individual teachers (Fullan 2008; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). What has been evident is the lack of appropriate time and resource funding to support such change. Research has clearly shown that such reform processes take time—5 years at least to show dividends—and cost money (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). This not readily accounted for in the immediacy of political agenda, and an expectation of 'just in time' interventions. The patience evident in the Finnish model ought to be applied to other contexts. Finland has assiduously adhered to its educational agenda and 40 years on their plan, patience and practices have paid dividends (Sahlberg 2011).

There is though a rather frightening paradox, and a set of unintended consequences of change, that can be evidenced from analysis of this scenario. As the demands for greater professionalism have grown (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011), so too is the testing, appraisal and accountability of teachers, and more particularly of their students' learning (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011). Under this regime of greater expectations and accountability, the levels of professionalism, as defined by sense of agency and autonomy (Pearson and Moomaw 2005), have declined. Teachers leave the profession they once valued and worked hard for because they can no longer have the professional control and sense of achievement they once had (O'Brien et al. 2007). Research indicates that attrition rates in new graduates have never been at a higher level (Johnson et al. 2010). Interestingly though, Finland does not suffer from this dilemma. Their teachers are trusted, respected in the community and their accountability levels are directly to their local community (Sahlberg 2011). Their teachers stay in teaching. While the expectation of 'more and better' from teachers is an admirable goal, it would seem that too much testing of students and teachers is not a good thing (Darling-Hammond 2010).

Beyond this paradox though is the reductionism that is evident in the narrative of professionalism. When reducing the complex issues concerning teacher accountability, more focussed professional learning, enhanced and quality teaching and improved student learning to a simple 'professionalism' or 'professionalising' the teaching workforce, many essential components are rendered inconsequential.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the findings regarding professionalism from empirical research and a review of the literature, this critical essay has set out to evaluate those findings

within the educational discourse applying critical theory to the complex issues. It notes the difficulties and conflation in the application of terms and recognises the complexities of the sets of areas affiliated with 'professionalism' in education. It highlights some assumptions regarding these issues and notes the ways in which reductionism renders invisible some of the issues and concerns that deserve recognition and further debate. The critique provided here aligns with Freire's idea of political action, when he states: "'being' in the world means to transform and re-transform the world, not to adapt to it" (2007, pp. 4–5) Through analysis, the essay observes that, while professionalism may be being used as a tool for teacher reformation, there are benefits for teachers that may come at a cost. The critical essay concludes by acknowledging the paradox that is evident when teachers are increasingly called to account for their students' learning outcomes, so that key elements of professionalism in the form of autonomy and agency have diminished. This diminution, and its attending assumptions, deserve to be challenged and debated. This critical essay has stepped in that direction.

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