

# Professionalism, job control and workplace organising

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My starting point for talking about professionalism is a book I read a long time ago by Jenny Ozga and Martin Lawn called *Teacher, Professionalism and Class* (1) which looked at links between teacher professionalism and trade union organisation. They made the point that professionalism is a problematic, two-sided concept. It's used in some forms as a mechanism of control - it creates a sense of hierarchy and of professional elites. It's also used to invoke notions of commitment, 'going the extra mile', and vocation, which are used to justify not asking for reasonable salaries and doing what you do 'for the love of the job'. At its most extreme, it's used to criticise those taking industrial action as somehow acting unprofessionally. So for many trade unionists, professionalism is a problematic concept. But as Ozga and Lawn pointed out, the concept has two sides - it's also about autonomy and job control, and can be a defence against managerial imposition. The examples I'll discuss here are from the schools sector but many of the factors driving developments in schools are also driving developments in FE, because the mechanisms of control are the same.

I want to quote from an editorial in the National Union of Teachers journal *The School Master* (sic) in the 1960s: 'Freedom for the teacher in their classrooms is a strongly held professional value. It has always been a source of pride to the profession, and a very proper one, that in this country the teacher has the inalienable right to decide what to teach and how to teach it' (2). I don't think there is a teacher in a school or college today who feels that they have 'the inalienable right to decide what to teach and how to teach it'. Actually, the experience is almost the reverse - teachers feel that they have almost no control over what they teach, and they're scrutinised intensely about how they teach.

The question is: how have we shifted from where we were then to where we are now?

I see this as a push-back that started in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s, when lots of progressive developments from the 1960s, many of which we saw in further and adult education, were deeply unpalatable to powerful interests in society. Because of its profound ideological importance, education was always at the heart of that struggle to 'take back control'.

What is interesting when you look at the New Right discussions of the time is that they often invoked a concept of 'producer capture' as part of their analysis. Understanding this concept is key to understanding why the New Right (and now the not-so-new Right) have waged a relentless attack on organised educators. In their view, the monopolistic position of public services (education, health, other aspects of the welfare state) allows them to get 'taken over' by the producers, the people who work in them, and that rather than being run in the interests of users they're run in the interests of the producers. Taking back control meant confronting, challenging and defeating the organised professional interests that they associate with producer capture. It's why in the literature you see that they actually despised 'professionalism' because it was associated with the idea of professional autonomy and control. However, 'taking back control' required mechanisms that made it possible. In my view, we can identify two overarching, inextricably linked, mechanisms of control. First, was the introduction of the market into the education system - you challenge producer capture by subjecting the people who work in public services to the 'discipline' of market forces. Second, was an Ofsted driven managerialism in which the State determined what 'good' education looked like, and institutional managers were relied on to ensure classroom compliance. Teachers in schools and colleges have experienced marketisation and managerialism very intensely. They have seen increasing control over

almost all aspects of their work, and the linked pressures to perform and 'meet standards' also drive up workload massively.

The research I'm going to refer to here concerns schoolteachers, although FE teachers' experiences are very similar because the underlying cause of the problems, marketisation and managerialism, are the same. The research explores the causes of the teacher supply crisis (3). Obviously, workload was an issue; it's way higher in the UK than in other European countries. Pay was also an issue; pay in England is lower than the European average for educational professionals. But what this research indicated was that these were not actually the main issues. The main issue was 'work strain'. Work strain is a combination of work intensity and task discretion. Work intensity is not the number of hours you work but how hard you are working within those hours; task discretion is how much control you have over the work that you do. The research indicated that in the English system, where marketisation and managerialism driven by Ofsted are so acute, educational professionals have the highest work intensity and the lowest task discretion.

I'm obviously not dismissing the importance of pay and workload (which will always be core organising issues), but I'm arguing that pay and workload are part of a wider set of issues that are fundamentally about control of our own work. Many of these are so-called 'professional' issues (that relate to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and there can be a tendency to dismiss such matters as 'not trade union issues'. I think that view is mistaken for two reasons. First, it fails to recognise that a huge part of how education workers experience marketisation and managerialism is precisely in relation to these 'professional' issues. This is where teachers experience loss of control over their work most acutely. Second, it fails to recognise that it is in regard to 'professional issues' (what is taught and how it is taught) that the political right has been at its most dangerous and aggressive. Questions of curriculum and pedagogy are profoundly political and precisely why the state has intervened in the way it has to 'take back control'. This is not terrain the left can afford to vacate based on the erroneous view that professional issues are not trade union issues. On the contrary, educational unions need to both occupy that space much more effectively than they typically do now, and organise in ways that support a collective push back. This requires union responses at every level of the organisation, but particularly in the workplace because this is where teachers experience what Goodrich described as the 'frontier of control' (4). It is at the workplace where

the toxic mix of marketisation and managerialism interact to determine what teachers do and how they do it. As trade unions we have to be able to articulate and give expression to those grievances if we are to mobilise them. However, it is important to recognise that the managerialist and marketised ideas, values and practices that I'm describing have to some extent become internalised, even normalised among sections of the workforce. Many working in the education system were themselves educated in a testing and target-driven system. Many were trained as teachers in a system dominated by the demands of Ofsted. To borrow Stephen Ball's phrase, we have become 'neoliberal professionals' (5) learning to survive, and in some cases thrive, in a system that intentionally seeks to divide (both students and staff) by measuring, ranking and comparing. What Ball called the 'terrors of performativity' (5) is how control works in the neoliberal college, school or university.

The challenge facing educational unions in FE and elsewhere, therefore, is to speak to members in a way that can connect with their grievances and frustrations around all aspects of work; articulate alternatives; and convince members that, when they organise collectively, they can challenge both the market and managerialism. Such a process addresses issues of workload, but also of control and the sense of deskilling that is deeply felt but not always clearly articulated. It speaks to those members (and potential members) who experience workload problems, but who are also deeply unhappy with the '*datafication*' of their work, the micromanagement, and the constant scrutiny, and who know that something is fundamentally rotten about the system they work in. They're not excited about the work they do because it's not the work they want to be doing or the work they believe to be pedagogically sound. However, in posing this challenge for the union we also need to recognise that, despite all the problems and frustrations that are experienced, and the central importance of these issues in framing people's experience of work, many teachers do not see the union as the answer to their grievances, frustration and resentment. Rather, they often see the choice as either 'keep their head down' and 'play the game', or quit. This is the perception that 'the union' - more accurately its activists, organisers and leaders - have to change. But what has to change in the union to make the union the place where people can say: 'we don't have to take this'? I want to suggest two practical actions:

First, we need to encourage workplace representatives to organise around all the issues

that frustrate staff (not just members). Workload is frequently the 'way in' because workload is such a chronic and widely experienced problem (i.e. it both frustrates and unifies). But 'workload' can never be separated from the nature of the work (what it is, who decides what it is, and how - and by whom - is 'performance' judged?). There is a pressing need to connect workload and the wider questions of control (and non-control). In practical terms, this broadens the bargaining agenda; every issue becomes a union issue. A failure to address questions of control and professional autonomy misses the fundamental frustrations in teachers' work - the pervasive sense of deskilling and alienation.

Second, the union needs to be the place and space where FE educators can reclaim their teaching. Marketisation and managerialism are insidious. Almost without noticing, our language becomes the language of performativity, and our practices are compromised, even corrupted. This happens because markets and managerialism are powerful forces, and because many of the spaces where we could articulate alternatives have been co-opted by the state and employers (see developments in teacher education, for example). Given this, it is more vital than ever that the union becomes the space where teachers can (re-)connect with the teacher they want to be - where educators talk about teaching on their terms, using their language, addressing their concerns, and imagining what a more humane, socially just and democratic education system might look like. For nearly 50 years, state strategy has focused on trying to kill these ideas off. The union has to be the space where they can incubate and thrive, and where educators experience an alternative to the isolated, individualised neoliberal workplace, and realise their common experiences that are the foundation of solidarity.

I'll conclude by arguing that both the actions I'm suggesting require strong workplace organisation. The problems are systemic, and require system-wide responses. However, they are experienced by members and potential members in their workplaces, and it's in workplaces that neoliberal logics become internalised and embedded. For many colleagues this is where the frontier of control is experienced, and where it needs to be challenged. The actions I'm suggesting clearly *depend* on strong workplace organisation. They are also the way to *build* stronger workplace organisation. Strong workplace organisation does not exist in isolation, but depends on the dynamics of union organisation at the workplace, and the actions of the activists, organisers and leaders (whatever we call people,

*what they do* is what matters). Years, indeed decades, of attacks across all education sectors have taken their toll on teachers and union organisation. I'm not claiming to have all the answers (by any means) but I'm suggesting that what I'm outlining here needs to be part of the process of building back union power as an essential step for educators to take back control of their work.

#### References:

1. Jenny Ozga and Martin Lawn (1981) *Teacher, Professionalism and Class: a study in organised teachers*. Falmer Press: London.
2. NUT (1960) Editorial in *The School Master* quoted in G. Grace (1987) *Teacher and the State in Britain: A changing relation*, in Lawn, M. and Grace, G. (eds) *Teachers: the Culture and Politics of Work*. Falmer Press: London.
3. Francis Green (2021) 'British teachers' declining job quality: evidence from the Skills and Employment Survey', *Oxford Review of Education* 47 (3) 386-403.
4. Carter L. Goodrich (1921) *The Frontier of Control* available online <http://www.workerscontrol.net/theorists/frontier-control-study-british-workshop-politics-carter-l-goodrich>
5. Stephen Ball (2003) 'The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity', *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2) 215-228.

#### **To all PSE readers:**

***PSE 105 (October 2021) will include article versions of the two introductory talks given at our May online discussion of lesson observations:***

***Nina Doran on 'Management fixation with observations'***

***Matt O'Leary on 'Lesson observation: beyond performance management'***

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