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ABSTRACT

To explore how charter schools will enhance teacher professionalism, this paper provides a theoretical framework for a qualitative study that investigated the role played by Colorado's charter-school policy in teacher development. Based on a review of the literature, the paper provides a baseline for comparison. The text examines bureaucratic conceptions of teaching, the prevalence of educational bureaucracies, and the effects of bureaucratic control and standardization, claiming that such an organization is characterized by hierarchies and centralized decision making. The text also examines professional conceptions of teaching, providing some characteristics and examples from the field and claiming that teacher professionalism develops best in schools with flexible and decentralized organizational structures. The text concludes that charter schools are not immune to bureaucracy and that charter-school policy sends contradictory messages about teacher professionalism. Parents usually hold administrative positions in such schools and usually want the authority to hire and fire teachers, which offers teachers little professional control. (Contains 39 references.) (RJM)

Colorado's Charter School Policy and Teacher Professionalism: School Level Interpretations

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INTRODUCTION

Charter school policy is often surrounded by high hopes and promises. Proponents claim charter schools expand educational choice, encourage innovation, increase accountability, promote true decentralization, and provide teachers with enhanced professional opportunities (Garcia & Garcia, 1996; Raywid, 1995). When surveyed, state legislators and policy makers cited similar reasons for introducing charter school laws (Nathan & Powers, 1997). Among them were helping children who have not succeeded in existing schools, providing opportunities for "educational entrepreneurs," expanding the range of schools available, increasing student achievement, and pressuring the existing system to improve. Though all of these issues deserve serious investigation, this paper focuses on the role charter schools play in increasing teacher professionalism. Proponents and policy makers alike make reference to opportunities for teachers, yet it is not clear what these opportunities are supposed to be. Nor is it clear how these opportunities may differ from what is currently available to teachers in regular public schools. This paper is a conceptual analysis of the issue. It represents the theoretical framework of a larger qualitative study investigating the role Colorado's charter school policy plays in increasing teacher professionalism.

In order to assess whether charter school policy enhances the professional opportunities of teachers, one must have a baseline for comparison. A review of literature on teacher professionalism and workplace conditions discloses two general conceptions of teaching -- bureaucratic and professional. These are discussed below. Overall, the bureaucratic conception of teaching describes conditions in many public schools (Apple, 1986; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Boyer, 1990; Lortie, 1975). As such, it is used a baseline for comparison. The professional conception of teaching is what reformers urge ought to be (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990; Holmes Group, 1986). Elements of professionalism can be found in public schools that have undergone restructuring (Little, 1988; Meier, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Smylie, Lazarus & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). These two conceptions of teaching serve as an

analytic framework. Dimensions of analysis include organizational structure, professional control, workplace conditions, and roles of teachers. Colorado's charter school policy is analyzed within this framework, with particular attention given to school level variables such as governance structure and curricular orientation.

BUREAUCRATIC CONCEPTION OF TEACHING

Prevalence of Educational Bureaucracies

The bureaucratic conception of teaching has a long history, dating back to the late 1800's with the advent of mass public education. District bureaucracies developed to service the ever increasing number of schools, and soon public education became a bureaucratized system patterned after the industrial "efficiency" model (Lortie, 1975). Teacher unions also contributed to the bureaucratic conception of teaching. Since unions customarily represented skilled labor, a similar approach to collective bargaining was taken when negotiating for teachers. Instead of attempting to restructure the public school system or to reestablish the expertise and skill of teachers, collective bargaining contracts simply focused on minimizing external controls, thereby leaving the bureaucratic system intact (Lortie, 1975). School reforms of the early 1980's further reinforced this educational bureaucracy. These reforms sought to standardize teaching. They focused on tightening bureaucratic controls over teacher behavior, especially in areas of curriculum and instruction. The thinking was that if teaching could be standardized, then classroom uncertainties would be reduced and student achievement should increase (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 1994).

Bennett & LeCompte (1990) describe a modern day educational bureaucracy. Within such a system, decision making is centralized and hierarchical. State and district level administrators determine budgets, schedules, curricular content and standards, textbooks, testing programs, and content of inservices. Schedules are fixed and imposed from above, indicating days in session, dates of inservices, and the beginning and ending of school days. Countless rules and regulations

from national, state, and district level authorities mandate how schools are governed. They stipulate everything from procedures for placing students in special education to which textbooks and materials are to be used at each grade level to when certain tests must be administered. Accountability is measured by compliance to these rules and regulations. Additionally, schools are departmentalized by grade level, subject area, and special programs. They operate in a regimented fashion, with bells dictating the beginning and ending of school days, as well as how the day is organized in between. Curricula are standardized, specifying what content is to be taught at which grade levels. These grade level curricula are often developed by outside experts and come prepackaged as "teacher proof" curricula. Included are instructional objectives, lesson plans, mandated readings and exercises, pre- and post-tests, and supplemental activities. In a bureaucratic system, teachers are the rank and file workers who carry out the decisions of their superiors.

A national survey by the Carnegie Foundation corroborated the continuing presence of a bureaucratic conception of teaching, especially the limited decision making capacity of teachers (Boyer, 1990). Of the more than 20,000 teachers surveyed, many had little authority in areas directly influencing their work. For example, most teachers said they "were not at all" or only "slightly involved" in selecting new administrators (93%), in evaluating teacher performance (92%), in selecting new teachers (90%), in deciding how the school budget is spent (80%), and in setting student retention or promotion policies (71%). More than half of the teachers surveyed "were not at all" or only "slightly involved" in designing staff development or inservice programs (57%) and in determining student placement into tracks or special classes (57%). Additionally, 59% of teachers surveyed said that support services for teaching were only "fair" or "poor." 45% were dissatisfied with the level of control they had over their professional lives. Overall, such responses indicate that few teachers participate in key decision making areas concerning colleagues, work environment, student progress and placement, and professional development. Superiors continue to make such decisions, thereby reinforcing the bureaucratic conception of teaching.

Effects of Bureaucratic Control and Standardization

What effect has a bureaucratized system had on teachers? Research has revealed that a bureaucratic system of control, coupled with efforts to standardize teaching, has prompted a number of unintended consequences. First among them is the large scale deskilling of teachers (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Deskilling occurs when teaching becomes routinized and standardized, thereby decreasing the autonomy and decision making capacity of teachers and preventing them from using their specialized knowledge, skills and expertise. Teachers who experienced the effects of standardization and deskilling said they felt like assembly line workers or clerks whose jobs were simply to organize, disseminate, and process predeveloped student tasks (McNeil, 1988). Their decision making authority had been reduced to issues of classroom management. In a conceptual analysis of teacher decision making, Cuban (1984) concluded that teachers working in deskilled jobs within a bureaucratized system had direct influence only over classroom related concerns such as the arrangement of space, the ratio of teacher to student talk, the format of instruction (whole class, small group, centers), and the degree of movement students are permitted without asking the teacher.

Efforts to standardize teaching have also "intensified" the workload of teachers (Apple, 1986). According to Apple, intensification is evidenced by a lack of time, decreased sociability and sense of community, and a policy of cutting corners or eliminating what seems to be inconsequential. These outcomes can be attributed to the increased administrative tasks for which teachers are responsible. In intensified school settings, teachers are responsible for implementing "curricular systems" which require covering a host of detailed, behaviorally prescribed content objectives for each grade level. They must repeatedly assess students with pre-tests, post-tests, and varied other testing programs. Apple found that teachers often taught to the test by reducing content to atomistic units that were easily assessed on standardized tests. A few teachers even commented that they simply wanted to "get this done" and "[didn't] have time to be creative or imaginative" (p. 44). Teachers are also responsible for keeping detailed records of student

progress on elaborate accounting systems. McNeil (1988) found that teachers were preoccupied with the added paperwork associated with testing, grading, and record keeping. To cope with the increased workload and to ensure that students passed the tests, some teachers simplified complex topics, omitted controversial issues, presented students with lists and outlines of important facts to memorize, and taught content recognition rather than understanding.

Lastly, and also the worst effect of bureaucratic control and standardization, is teacher burnout. Dworkin (1991) defined burnout as role-specific alienation characterized by feelings of stress, isolation, role conflict, and a sense of powerlessness about how to make one's work more meaningful. In a review of the literature, LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) found that burnout often occurred in highly politicized or bureaucratized settings where teachers were overburdened by paperwork and increasing responsibilities and had little control over their work because of external demands for reform and accountability. A random survey of 1,060 Houston public school teachers supported these findings (Dworkin, 1991). The survey indicated that over 30% of teachers were experiencing burnout after the implementation of a 1984 school reform which increased bureaucratic controls and sought to standardize teaching.

To summarize, a bureaucratic conception of teaching is characterized by a hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structure. Decision making is centralized. Individual schools abide by the decisions of district school boards, central administrative offices, and state departments of education. Budgets, curricula, schedules, and testing programs are in large part determined externally. As such, there is a uniformity of schedules, curricula, and textbooks. Teachers have little professional control over their work. Their decision making authority tends to be limited to matters of classroom management. In large part, they are responsible for implementing the decisions of others. Hence, accountability is measured by compliance to myriad rules and regulations. The departmentalization within many schools and the fixed schedules controlled by bells create working conditions which support a weak sense of community among teachers. In intensified work settings, the situation worsens due to the rushed pace, work overload, and

excessive attention to administrative tasks such as testing, grading, and record keeping. Teachers see themselves as assembly line workers and clerks. They have a tendency to cut corners by teaching to the test or by focusing on content recognition instead of understanding. In worst case scenarios, teachers burnout. They feel isolated, stressed, alienated, and powerless to effect change in order to make their work more meaningful.

PROFESSIONAL CONCEPTION OF TEACHING

Quest for Professionalization

Throughout the history of public schooling, there have been recurring attempts to professionalize teaching (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990). In 1839, Horace Mann established the first normal school for the training of teachers. He believed that in order to improve education, teachers must be carefully selected, well-trained, and given greater status and authority. A similar call for better training and preparation was made by progressives at the turn of the century. At their insistence, professional schools of education were opened in many universities. Most recently, school reforms of the late 1980's urged greater teacher professionalism, seeking to reverse the trend of deskilling triggered by standardization and bureaucratic controls. Major reports by the Holmes Group (1986) and the Carnegie Forum (1986) recommended career ladders for teachers, a national board for professional standards, greater involvement in decision making, and collegial work environments. Other reforms advised site-based management and school restructuring to empower teachers and increase their decision making authority (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 1994). Overall, these efforts to professionalize teaching illustrate the ongoing struggle between standardized approaches to schooling which rely on bureaucratic controls and individualized child-centered approaches which require skilled and knowledgeable teachers to make complex decisions (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990).

The rationale behind efforts to professionalize teaching is based on the premise that professional control improves both the quality of individual services and the level of knowledge in the profession as a whole (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990). Professional control assumes practitioners (teachers) possess adequate levels of specialized knowledge and put the welfare of their clients (students) above all else. It also assumes there is collective responsibility for defining, communicating, and enforcing professional standards of practice and ethics. Professional control also gives teachers collective autonomy to determine how best to do their job. As Sarason notes, "[If teachers] have a voice in matters that affect them, they will have a greater commitment to the overall enterprise and will take greater responsibility for what happens to the enterprise" (1990: 61). Conversely, if teachers do not participate in decision making, they tend to minimize the changes they must make in carrying out given policies (Connell, 1985; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). In other words, teachers who have professional control are well-trained and have extensive decision making authority to quickly and precisely meet the needs of students. Accountability is measured by effectiveness, rather than by compliance to rules and regulations. This emphasis on effectiveness encourages the continual improvement of teaching.

Given the tendency of our public school system toward bureaucratization, how can teachers increase their autonomy and expertise in order to gain professional control? A growing body of research indicates that for teachers to develop their professional knowledge and skills they need to work in collegial learning environments, and for them to effect meaningful changes that improve education, teachers need to have decision making authority and opportunities for leadership (see Darling-Hammond, 1990; Devaney & Sykes, 1988; Little, 1988; Meier, 1992, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sarason, 1990; Sizer, 1992; Smylie, 1996). To create and sustain a work environment where teachers have professional control requires the commitment of teachers. After all, "professionalism is a form of liberty that is not simply conferred; it is earned" (Devaney and Sykes, 1988: 4). An entire faculty must be willing to reconsider existing norms and values, to change patterns of behavior, beliefs about teaching and learning, and traditional roles and

responsibilities. It also requires simultaneous changes to the school's organizational structure, culture, and power relationships.

Characteristics and Examples From the Field

There is general agreement in the literature as to what constitutes a professional conception of teaching. First and foremost, teachers have professional control over both the conceptualization and implementation of their work (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990). They are involved in determining school policies as well as in carrying them out. As such, accountability is measured by effectiveness, not by compliance to rules and regulations. A professional conception of teaching also requires a decentralized and collaborative organizational structure, one that is flexible to meet the changing needs of students (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990; Meier, 1992). Traditional power relationships are altered to provide teachers with opportunities for leadership (Lieberman, Saxl & Miles, 1988). Overall, the professional responsibilities and decision making authority of teachers extend beyond traditional teaching duties to include policy making, administration, school wide planning, and curriculum development in order to make meaningful changes in the way students are educated (Meier, 1992, 1995).

Research has shown that simply increasing the decision making authority of teachers and extending their professional responsibilities does not necessarily produce better, more effective instruction. Within a professional conception of teaching, decision making must be focused on student learning. A recent study found that teacher participation in school-based decision making was positively related to instructional improvement when the emphasis was on student learning (Smylie, Lazarus & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). Teachers in "highly participative councils" focused on the school's mission, curriculum, instruction, and staff development. Accountability, collective autonomy, mutual responsibility, and opportunities for teacher learning were encouraged. In contrast, "least participative councils" emphasized procedural, administrative, and other management concerns, not issues directly related to academic instruction. Another study about site-based management confirmed that teacher decision making was often focused on non-

instructional issues such as lunch schedules or budget matters (Midgely & Wood, 1993). In fact, only about one-third of public school teachers felt they had much influence in determining school policies such as curriculum, content of inservices, or school wide discipline (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). This distinction in decision making is vital. A professional conception of teaching focuses teacher decision making on issues directly related to student learning.

Given the high degree of teacher involvement in making decisions and setting school policies, a professional conception of teaching requires certain workplace conditions. First, there is consensus about the goals of the school and collective responsibility for them (Little, 1988; Meier, 1992; O'Day & Smith, 1993). Second, relationships between teachers, as well as between teachers and administrators, are supportive (Meier, 1992, 1995). Third, a collegial learning environment exists where teachers actively collaborate to develop their professional knowledge and skills, which they then center on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Lieberman, 1995; Meier, 1992, 1995; Sarason, 1990; Sizer, 1992). Fourth, there are sufficient resources available to carry out the job, allowing teachers to experiment and adapt their instruction (Louis & Smith, 1990).

Of all these workplace conditions, a collegial learning environment seems most important. Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers who worked in schools where the social organization supported collegial relations were more focused on instructional issues and student achievement. Teachers in these "high consensus" schools collaborated on school goals and instructional issues, participated in shared governance, experienced greater professional satisfaction, had higher levels of commitment, believed in possibilities, and were more enthusiastic and open to change. In turn, these kinds of activities and dispositions led to constructive action geared toward improving classroom instruction. When teachers work together, learn together, and make decisions together, a collective vision and its counterpart, collective responsibility, are established.

A professional conception of teaching, then, offers teachers many roles. The most frequently cited role in the literature is teacher as expert (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1990; Devaney & Sykes, 1988; Holmes Group, 1986). Expert teachers

maintain high levels of knowledge in their areas of expertise. They are skilled problem-solvers, which requires continual learning and professional development. Another popular role is teacher as generalist (Louis & Smith, 1990; Sizer, 1992). These teachers focus on developing relationships with both students and faculty in order to create a sense of community in the school. In such supportive and personalized settings, teachers can more effectively meet the individual needs of students. Lastly, there is the role of teacher as leader. Teacher leadership can take place in a number of areas such as teaching, professional development, governance, research and evaluation, and union representation (see Devaney, 1987; Little, 1988; Miller, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989). Ideally, a professional conception of teaching includes all of these roles and seeks to balance individual expertise with more generally focused school concerns (Louis & Smith, 1990).

Like teacher decision making, teacher leadership best serves students' needs when it takes place in a collaborative work environment and is focused on issues related to student learning. Little (1988) found that teacher leadership at the school level had the potential to change traditional bureaucratic relationships to an ethos of collective responsibility. This took place when teachers willingly became involved in school governance and decision making, in establishing collaborative relationships, and in assuming collective responsibility for student achievement. Additionally, teacher leadership is more easily focused on student learning in a collaborative school culture. Rosenholtz (1989) observed that in schools with collaborative cultures, teacher leadership centered on student learning, instructional issues, and professional development. In schools where teachers were isolated from each other, teacher leadership served simply as a sounding board for problems.

To summarize, a professional conception of teaching takes place in schools with flexible and decentralized organizational structures. Within such settings, teachers have professional control over both the conception and implementation of their work. They have broad decision making authority which is focused on instructional issues. There is collective autonomy and responsibility for student learning. Moreover, teachers have various roles and responsibilities, many of which extend beyond teaching. Ideally, these roles balance individual expertise with more

generally focused school concerns such as building collaborative cultures and meeting individual student needs. Working conditions are collegial, with norms of shared responsibility and ongoing and active learning for both students and teachers as its cultural trademarks. Schools that support a professional conception of teaching also have sufficient resources for teachers to do their jobs well.

DISCUSSION

How effective is charter school policy in promoting a professional conception of teaching? In general, charter schools are intended to infuse innovation into a traditionally bureaucratic system in order to increase student achievement, especially the achievement of students who previously had limited success in regular public schools. In so doing, charter schools should expand educational choice, increase accountability, and provide teachers and other educational entrepreneurs with increased professional opportunities.

Implicit in this rationale, however, are both indictments of and encouragement for a professional conception of teaching. By noting that the current system needs improving, that some students are not succeeding, and that most students can achieve at higher levels, teachers are implicated in the shortcomings of public education. Teachers work most closely with students, and if students are not achieving then teachers have somehow failed in their responsibilities. This central role of teachers in the educational mission draws attention to the lack of accountability in the profession. Additionally, it is not clear what is assumed by "educational entrepreneurs." Does it mean public education is now the domain of anyone eager and motivated enough to try his or her hand at running a school, regardless of professional qualifications? Opening the door of teaching to all-comers undermines a professional conception of teaching. If, however, charter school policies are intended for teachers who have ambition and vision and simply need an opportunity for greater professional control in order to engage their entrepreneurism in the service of improving

public education, then a more professional conception of teaching is assumed. Overall, charter school policy sends contradictory messages about teacher professionalism.

Focusing on Colorado's legislation specifically, one finds similar contradictions. In the legislative declaration (Senate Bill 93-183), it states "that the best education decisions are made my those who know the students best and who are responsible for implementing the decisions, and, therefore, educators and parents have a right to participate in the education institutions which serve them." Certainly parents know their children best. Teachers, however, have keen insights to these children's capabilities and needs as students in their classrooms. Moreover, teachers are the ones responsible for implementing educational decisions. This leaves questions as to the proper role of parents in charter schools. Most Colorado charter schools are started by parents, some by a combination of parents and teachers, and a few solely by teachers (Finn, Manno & Bierlein, 1996; Griffin, 1997). Since Colorado's legislation leaves the governance structure of a charter school to the discretion of those who organize it, parents are likely to be members of governing boards. As such, they can dictate school policies, curriculum, and the hiring and firing of teachers. Parents at a Colorado League of Charter Schools Conference who held administrative positions at charter schools strongly voiced their desire to have authority to hire and fire teachers at will in order to ensure teaching excellence (Boettiger, 1997). In such circumstances, teachers would have little professional control and would be relegated to carrying out the decisions of others. Though teachers can be members of governing boards, which thereby increases their authority, charter schools with strong parental roles can undermine a professional conception of teaching.

Colorado's legislation also establishes charter schools as autonomous entities within a public school district -- as do all charter school policies. Charter schools receive their share of public funding based on student enrollment. Each charter school is then responsible for determining its budget and allocating it in such a manner as to carry out its educational mission. Essentially, charter schools operate as small businesses, outside the regulation of district bureaucracies and with control over educational products and services, budgets, and personnel. Such features minimize the possibility of bureaucratic control and standardization. Therefore, one

would not expect to find a bureaucratic conception of teaching operating in charter schools. Despite policy intentions, however, charter schools are not fully immune to either bureaucratization or standardization.

About one third of Colorado charter schools are based on or feature a Core Knowledge curriculum (Griffin, 1997). By design, Core Knowledge curricula are presented as a "curricular system," complete with prescribed and carefully sequenced content objectives, pre- and post-tests, and recommendations for supplemental readings, activities and materials. Such a curriculum would standardize teaching within individual charter schools. Teachers at each grade level would be required to teach similar content, administer a battery of tests to assess student progress, and follow a tightly prescribed schedule. Moreover, parent demand for Core Knowledge curricula is high and the influential role of parents in most charter schools could encourage strict adoption of the entire curricular system. Under such circumstances, features of a bureaucratic conception of teaching may be evident. How teachers respond to standardized curricula remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Core Knowledge curricula seem to run counter to a professional conception of teaching.

Lastly, Colorado's charter school legislation states that one of its goals is "to create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site" (Senate Bill 93-183). Though somewhat vague, this particular goal does seem to promote a professional conception of teaching. Responsibility for the learning program at the school site implies teachers have authority over both the conceptualization and implementation of their work. Within this context, teachers would be in charge of developing the curriculum as well as assessing and placing students. Some of the more experiential, child-focused charter schools in Colorado offer teachers this kind of professional control (Griffin, 1997). What is meant by "new professional opportunities," however, is not entirely clear. This can mean that teachers now have opportunities to serve on governing boards, to be part of a school-based management team, or to take responsibility for the hiring and evaluation of their peers. It can also mean teacher involvement in determining budgets, curricula, and student

placement. Of importance to a professional conception of teaching is that these "new professional opportunities" are focused on student learning. Charter schools may be able to offer teachers new professional opportunities not regularly available in a bureaucratized public school system. Yet, if these opportunities divert teachers from their primary job of educating students, then a professional conception of teaching is not realized.

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