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## THE ACTIVIST PROFESSIONAL\*

**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I present an argument for the development of a new form of teacher professionalism, which I refer to as activist professionalism. I briefly identify two types of professionalism, democratic professionalism and managerial professionalism which I argue have informed recent debates about teacher professionalism. I indicate how an activist view of professionalism recasts the political and professional roles of teachers in quite fundamentally different ways. At the core of the argument is the development of Anthony Giddens's notions of 'active trust' and 'generative politics'. I indicate how these two ideas provide a conceptual and political basis to rethink the activities of teachers and others working in the collective education enterprise. I draw on some recent school based teacher research projects in which I have been involved to develop and provide evidence for how this type of professionalism can be achieved individually and collectively.

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of teacher professionalism and whether teaching can be considered a profession circulates around public discourse with great regularity. This paper extends this debate by developing an argument for a new kind of teacher professionalism, which I refer to as 'activist professionalism'. This kind of professionalism has strong roots in more orthodox definitions of professionalism – in terms of *expertise* (the possession by an occupational group of exclusive knowledge and practice), *altruism* (an ethical concern by this group for its clients) and *autonomy* (the professional's need and right to exercise control over entry into and subsequent practice within, that particular occupation) (Bottery, 1996: 179–180). But it also differs from orthodox or 'classical' views in that its *raison d'être* is fundamentally political. It brings together alliances and networks of various educational interest groups for collective action to improve all aspects of the education enterprise at the macro level and student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community at the micro level. After reviewing versions of teacher professionalism which have dominated public and bureaucratic discourse over recent years, I then

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sketch out some of the characteristics of the activist professional. Drawing on Giddens' (1994) notions of 'active trust' and 'generative politics', I outline what activist professionalism might look like in practice. I draw on my experiences working with teachers in Australia in facilitated research through the activities of the Innovative Links project for teacher professional development, the National Schools Network (NSN) and the NSN/ACSA project on middle schooling to provide evidence of the possibilities for activist professionalism. Central to the development of a protocol for collective or individual action are three questions. First, what is the best place to accomplish the project of becoming activist professionals in teaching? Second, what is the best place for ME to be? Finally, what can I do from where I am?

#### DOMINANT DISCOURSES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

In Australia, government policy regarding teacher professional development and the underpinning notions of teacher professionalism has been informed by two dominant discourses: democratic professionalism and managerial professionalism (Preston, 1995, 1996). According to Preston (1996: 192) democratic professionalism was a concept used by the then Australian Teachers Union (ATU). For the ATU:

Democratic professionalism does not seek to mystify professional work, nor to unreasonably restrict access to that work; it facilitates the participation in decision making by students, parents and others and seeks to develop a broader understanding in the community of education and how it operates. As professionals, teachers must be responsible and accountable for that which is under their control, both individually and collectively through their unions (Australian Teachers Union, 1991: 1–2; quoted in Preston, 1996: 192)

The core of democratic professionalism is an emphasis on collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders. Preston (1995) maintains that this approach is a strategy for industry development, skill development and work organisation. According to Brennan (1996), it suggests that the teacher has a wider responsibility than the single classroom and includes contributing to the school, the system, other students, the wider community, and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession.

Initiatives to enhance teacher professionalism such as the Innovative Links Project and the National Schools Network (NSN)<sup>1</sup> are premised on a democratic view of professionalism. Both these projects do much more

than help teachers develop better ways of improving their practice. Referring to the NSN, Preston (1996) suggests that these projects are developing and testing better ways of carrying out research to consolidate the knowledge base of the teaching profession through close collaboration between practising teachers and academics. The primary aim of school-based teacher inquiry in these projects is to foster understanding and improvement of practice; and to help teachers to come to know the epistemological bases of their practice (Cochrane Smith & Lytle, 1998; Sachs, 1999). Through facilitated research, academics and school-based practitioners work collaboratively in mutually identified projects. Their focus, their modes of affiliation, forms of documentation and communication become the vehicle for a more inclusive form of teacher professionalism. At the core of this activity are new forms of reciprocity between teachers and academics and other education stakeholders whereby all groups come to understand the nature and limitations of each other's work and perspectives. However, Preston (1996: 196) correctly observed that while the Innovative Links project is integrated into the everyday work of schools, it does not make the same connections with university education faculties. It breaks down the individualism of teachers' work, but does not do the same for academics' work.

With devolution and decentralisation, an alternative view of teacher professionalism has emerged. I refer to this as managerial professionalism. According to Rees (1995: 15), managerialism is an ideology with two distinct claims: that efficient management can solve any problem; and that practices which are appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be applied to the public sector. Furthermore, as Pollitt (1993) notes, the values of managerialism have been promoted as being universal: management is inherently good, managers are the heroes, managers should be given the room and autonomy to manage and other groups should accept their authority. Rees' (1995) research on scientists from the CSIRO's McMaster laboratory at the University of Sydney elicited some cogent responses regarding researchers' perceptions of the managerial intentions and the rationalisation of their organisation. Rees drew attention to three trends: the disempowering role of management consultants; management's preoccupation with control; and loss of morale among highly trained professionals who had previously been very committed to their work and the organisation.

The same claims could well be made for Australian education systems under devolution and decentralisation. In this form of governance and management, teachers are placed in a long line of authority in terms of their accountability for reaching measurable outcomes that stretches through

the principal, to the district/regional office, to the central office. Brennan (1996: 22) describes this corporate management model as emphasising:

A professional who clearly meets corporate goals, set elsewhere, manages a range of students well and documents their achievements and problems for public accountability purposes. The criteria of the successful professional in this corporate model is of one who works efficiently and effectively in meeting the standardised criteria set for the accomplishment of both students and teachers, as well as contributing to the school's formal accountability processes.

Managerialism has also had a significant impact on the work of school principals, as well as teachers. Recent educational reforms in most Australian states to promote devolution and decentralisation have relied heavily on managerialist structures to ensure implementation and compliance of a frequently resistant profession. Recent restructuring has meant that the principal has moved from the role of senior colleague to one of institutional manager. Ferguson (1994) describes the impact of these reforms on the teaching profession:

The reform movement and the drive towards managerialism prudently took the initial professional formation of teachers within its ambit. Together they have led to a careful scrutiny of the sources of notions of professionalism and collective self-concept, and the values, assumptions and expectations that are associated with them: the entire gamut of the processes of group socialization, combined with the development of professional identity and allegiance to academic community' ... (p. 106).

He goes on to make some sobering observations about the consequences of managerialism for the teaching profession.

The potential impact on the constitution, standing, identity, autonomy and authority of the profession is enormous. The socialisation of intending teachers into the mores, values, understandings of what it means to be a teacher will switch from being developed in a collective setting of debate informed by theory, research and evidence, to one in which socialization is entirely dependent on two or three teachers. New teachers' capacities to act autonomously, work independently and most of all mount well-grounded challenges to managerial diktat are likely to diminish, and their sense of membership and solidarity of a larger body to be diluted (pp. 106–107).

In terms of teachers' professional development and the profession's moves to establish new and more active notions of teacher professionalism, the managerialist approach directly contrasts the democratic version described earlier. Furthermore, advocates of each of these kinds of professionalism are often at loggerheads with each other because democratic professionalism is adopted by unions and other professional bodies while managerial professionalism is advocated by systems and employers.

I now wish to move beyond the limitations and ideological interests and differences between democratic and managerial professionalism to sketch out some of the features of a more activist professionalism.

## ACTIVIST PROFESSIONALISM

In developing a perspective for an activist teacher professionalism, I draw on the work of Anthony Giddens (1994) in *Beyond Left and Right: the future of radical politics*, especially his concepts of active trust and generative politics. These concepts help to rethink the macro and micro social and political dimensions of teacher professionalism and move it in a more activist direction. They extend D. Hargreaves' (1994) idea of 'new professionalism', which he suggests. "involves movement away from the teacher's traditional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationship with colleagues, with students, and with parents. These relationships are becoming closer as well as more intense and collaborative, involving more explicit negotiation of roles and responsibilities" (p. 424). Furthermore, also like McLaughlin's (1997) 'new professionalism' activist professionalism moves the focus for analysis and action from the individual to the group. It is in the group that active trust needs to be embedded and from it that group generative politics can spring.

*Active trust*

Active trust is not unconditional. It is not blind faith in other people but is a contingent and negotiated feature of professional or social engagement with others. As Giddens (1994) notes, active trust demands increased visibility of social relations and also acts to increase such visibility. Recasting teacher professionalism in a more activist form calls for new kinds of social and professional relationships where different parts of the broader educational enterprise work together in strategic ways. Rather than sectional interests working independently and sometimes oppositionally, active trust requires that a shared set of values, principles and strategies is debated and negotiated. While on occasion it might be more strategic and in the interests of various sectional groups to act independently and autonomously, the larger political enterprise of defining notions of teacher professionalism and reclaiming moral and intellectual leadership over educational debates are the chief priority. David Hargreaves (1994: 424) claims that "Teachers are not merely working more co-operatively; they feel a stronger obligation towards and responsibility for their colleagues". This sentiment is central for the generation and sustaining of active trust.

In activist professionalism, trust, obligation and solidarity work together in complementary ways. They are the cornerstones of engagement among the various interest groups. For Giddens (1994: 127)

Trust in personal relations depends on an assumption of the integrity of the other. It is based on a 'positive spiral' of difference. Getting to know the other, coming to rely

on the other presumes pursuing difference as a means of developing positive emotional communication... Trust in others generates solidarity across time as well as space: the other is someone on whom one can rely, that reliance becoming a mutual obligation. . . . When founded on active trust, obligation implies reciprocity. Obligations are binding because they are mutual, and this is what gives them their authority.

Active trust, respect and reciprocity stand at the core of an activist teacher professionalism. The challenge in becoming an activist professional is that it requires strong commitment of time, energy and intellectual resources to agree on what is at the core of the activism. It demands not that each party inhabit each other's castles, as Somekh (1994) suggests, but rather, that each party at least looks inside the other's castle.

A further dimension of active trust is, as Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) remind us, trust in processes. They argue that

Trust in expertise and processes helps organizations develop and solve problems on a continuing basis in an environment where problems and challenges are continuous and changing. Processes to be trusted here are ones that maximize the organization's collective expertise and improve its problem-solving capacities (p. 98).

Central to the idea and the work of active trust is collaboration among various groups. Collaboration requires joint decision making and new ways of working together. The Western Melbourne Roundtable is a group of 5 schools associated with the Innovative Links project in Melbourne, Victoria that exemplifies this idea. The work of this team can be summarised as involving the processes of facilitation, collaborating and reflection. Team members acted as facilitators in conducting workshops, organizing meetings and maintaining links with the Western Melbourne roundtable. The school coordinator has a key role in: organizing team meetings and communicating with school, university and teachers' union colleagues and collaborated with a university colleague sharing the tasks of facilitating case writing workshops. Collaboration involves all team members writing the cases, resolving questions about the style of case writing and establishing relationships between colleagues from the schools, the university and the teachers' union. Talking about issues is an integral process as individuals are able to express their anxiety about how to go about case writing, identify any difficulty in choosing a topic, and identify ethical issues regarding recording personal information about children and experiences from the classroom. Finally, reflection on practice takes place informally through group discussion and individually through writing (Western Melbourne Roundtable, 1997). Through its structures and processes, this project typifies how decision-making is less hierarchical and requires different professional and personal relationships among various interest groups such as schools, universities, school systems, bureaucracies, unions

and community groups. Nevertheless, this type of trust is risky and open-ended, but it also is essential to learning and improvement (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Referring specifically to school university collaboration, Soltis (1994: 255) identifies what these new forms of association entail:

Genuine collaboration will not only require new teachers in new school cultures and structures, but also new teacher educators, new cultures in schools of education, and altered university structures for academics. Changing the culture and structure of the schools may look like a very difficult task, but is not totally impossible.

As seen from the Western Melbourne roundtable, collaborative partnerships involve a reciprocity that is essentially experimental. They assume that each party has something significant to contribute to the professional learning and political strategy of the other. But that also entails some risk, since they embody new relationships among the various parties and a different mode of operating within and outside traditional comfort zones. They also demonstrate that this kind of work is not apolitical and that it should be entered into with an understanding of the potential risks and controversies. Anderson and Herr (1999) comment on the reciprocity and the implications of its practice. They claim that

Academics who form alliances with practitioners or who send practitioners out into their schools to generate knowledge about practice should be equally willing to submit their own institutions and practices to the same level of investigative scrutiny (p. 17).

Reciprocal forms of association have three purposes. First, all parties work towards building joint endeavours that are themselves concerned with promoting further collaborative development. In practice this could be the presentation of a joint paper at a conference, joint writing for publication or the development of collaborative research projects. Through such joint endeavours, all parties begin to understand and extend how each of them work in their various contexts, and they experience opportunities for each of them to exchange expertise. Second, by promoting collaborative development, school-based practitioners, academics, bureaucrats and union officials are all given the opportunity to elaborate practical theories. This enables and encourages them to examine the relationship between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use as they define and direct their separate and shared improvement efforts. In so doing, teachers and academics generate and sustain the energy for change within their evolving relationship. Finally, such practices enhance professional dialogue, generating analytical insights into, and improvements of classroom practices in a variety of settings (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995).

The project at Braidwood Central School, a K-10 school in rural New South Wales associated with the Innovative Links project, is illustrative

of the importance of dialogue between teachers. It focussed on developing a school culture that supported the establishment of a middle school department. Being part of the project enabled Braidwood Central School to develop links with other schools. It facilitated the development of a greater degree of collegiality among staff and gave staff within the school opportunities to talk through issues with teachers from other schools associated with the project. In the words of one school staff member, “Getting to talk to other people makes you have a good hard look at what you’re doing” (Teacher, Braidwood Central School).

These new kinds of affiliation and collaboration move all parties beyond traditional technical notions of professional development and create spaces for new kinds of conversations to emerge. They provide opportunities for all groups to be engaged in public critical dialogues and debates about the nature of practice, how it can be communicated with others and how it can be continually improved. All parties move from peripheral involvements in the individual and collective projects to full participation. Dialogue is initiated about education in all of its contexts and dimensions, and about how people can learn from the experiences and collective wisdom of each other. At Braidwood, the project provided staff with the confidence to implement change, and an opportunity to recognise the expertise that exists within the school (Southern Cross Roundtable Portrayal Evaluation Team, 1996). As projects like this develop, this dialogue becomes an integral part of the strategy for activating a community of activist professionals. It is on-going, and while there are interruptions when the exigencies and pressures of life and work get in the way, the learning emerging from the dialogue can be returned to, reflected upon and provide the basis for new dialogues, positions and strategies. In particular, teachers spoke about how the project, in providing opportunities for release time and a collaborative relationship with university academics, gave them a sense of being valued and professional. For one member of staff this was the first time in a teaching career spanning 22 years. In another school the project opened up communication channels between teachers. Staff reported that the project enhanced professional conversations between and among teaching staff.

Prior to this we were faculty-based but now a number of us work across faculties breaking down the boundaries . . . we have spent a lot of time discussing educational issues rather than normal school time talk. (Currie et al., 1996: 40)

Under the conditions described here, expertise is interrogated and made mutually visible. As Giddens (1994: 129) notes, “in a more reflexive social order, (existing) assumptions come under strain and start to break down”. Furthermore, as Giddens (1994: 129) suggests



as opposed to 'acceptance of', or 'reliance on', expert authority, active trust presumes visibility and responsibility on both sides. Reflexive engagements with abstract systems may be puzzling and disturbing for lay individuals and resented by professionals. Yet they force both to confront issues of responsibility that otherwise remain latent.

This is an important aspect of active trust. It must be public and transparent, and it is something that must be exercised collectively rather than individually. Sustaining active trust is time-consuming and demanding, but as the projects associated with the Innovative Links project demonstrate, the development of a collective strategy for improvement and learning is certainly worth this investment.

### *Generative politics*

Associated with active trust is the idea and process of generative politics. A fundamental feature of generative politics is that it allows and encourages individuals and groups to make things happen rather than to let things happen to them. Generative politics exists in the space that links the state to reflexive mobilization in the society at large (Giddens, 1994: 15). Furthermore, while generative politics is a defence of the politics of the public domain, it does not situate itself in the old opposition between state and market. It works through providing material conditions and organisational frameworks that enable people to take collective charge of their own destiny and life-political decisions in the wider social order (Giddens, 1994). Accordingly, its goals and agendas are driven by those whose interests are most directly related to immediate and long term issues. An agenda for a generative politics of teacher professionalism involves such questions as:

- Whose issues get put on the agenda and how do these issues become public?
- Who provides the initial moral and intellectual leadership in such an endeavour?
- How is inclusiveness promoted such that a broad range of educational interests is represented and heard?
- How can trust and understanding be established to overcome traditional suspicions and reservations?
- How can alternative forms of association at the local, national and global levels be established?
- How do we find new ways of engaging in action with an ever-expanding group of interested parties, while remaining connected to our own place, time and interests?

Generative politics implies a number of conditions. First, it requires fostering the conditions under which desired outcomes can be achieved without determining those desires or bringing about those outcomes “from the top”. In this respect, it is organic, since it develops spatially and temporally in response to local and global issues and the needs of those are most directly involved and implicated. Second, generative politics involves creating situations in which *active trust* can be built and sustained, whether in schools, universities, bureaucracies or related agencies. Third, it demands according autonomy to those most affected by specific programs or policies. In practice, this means that for generative politics to have the desired political outcomes, it must emerge in response to real and emergent needs as they develop at the grass roots level. They cannot be imposed from outside by people who have little interest in the outcomes. Finally, decentralisation of political power is crucial. According to Giddens (1994: 93), “decentralisation is the condition of political effectiveness because of the requirement for bottom-up information flow as well as the recognition of autonomy”.

Social justice concerns are crucial for successful generative politics. They lead to a widened scope and increased levels of dialogue among various interested parties and through reflexivity and mutuality, they stimulate the production and dissemination of new knowledge and create opportunities for productive debate and engagement.

Generative politics provide an antidote to the fundamentalist and essentialist assumptions about social relations and organisations that inform managerialist notions of professionalism. Fundamentalist managerialist discourses of professionalism promote traditions and practices that have been appropriated from private sector management. The point about traditions, as Giddens (1994: 6) observes, is that “you don’t really have to justify them; they contain their own truth, a ritual truth, asserted as correct by the believer”. In a globally cosmopolitan order, such a stance becomes dangerous, because it is a refusal of dialogue. The managerialist form of professionalism acts against generative politics and active trust. It segments and divides education interest groups and hinders rather than facilitates dialogue among them.

What might an activist professionalism look like that is based on generative politics and active trust? Drawing on my own and others’ experiences of working in collegial and strategic ways with teachers, unions and systems to improve school-based practice, I will now sketch out a protocol for the aspiring activist professional.

## A PROTOCOL FOR ACTIVIST PROFESSIONALISM

For my purposes here, a protocol refers to ‘the way things are done’ and the rituals and regulations that enable them to be done. The protocol has two dimensions of principles and practice. Developing a protocol for an activist teacher professionalism requires new ways for teachers to work inside and outside of schools, It requires new kinds of affiliation and collaboration with varied educational interest groups. A number of key principles provide the foundation upon which any activist project needs to be grounded. These principles provide the strategic and conceptual scaffolding through which an activist teacher professionalism can be created and sustained. They include:

- inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. i.e. of teachers, academics, union officials, systems people, and employers as well as parents and other community groups;
- collective and collaborative action
- effective communication of aims, expectations etc;
- recognition of the expertise of all parties involved;
- creating an environment of trust and mutual respect;
- being responsive and responsible;
- acting with passion.
- experiencing pleasure and fun

These principles are meant to be broad and deep enough to sustain the momentum of what at times will be difficult political and professional work. They open up opportunities for renewing our notions of teacher professionalism. They move beyond self-interested conceptions of professionalism which defend threatened interests, deny accusations of damning characteristics and claim only laudable characteristics (Friedson, 1994: 171). Principles and practices of activist professionals, however, provide systematic ways of thinking and acting in the best of interests of *all* those who are involved in education. At the heart of these principles and practices are partnerships and practitioner research which in turn involve various processes of advocacy, network facilitation and mobilisation.

*Partnerships*

In any political endeavour involving different sectional or interest groups, reciprocity is crucial. Active listening and collective strategy are central to the successful implementation of any political activist project. Referring to school-university partnerships in particular, Yeatman (1996) advocates a two-way partnership between teacher educators and practising teachers.

She poses the question ‘what can each of these partners offer to each other?’ This assumes a division of labour between the two partners where there is a difference through their respective roles and an articulation of this difference in the exchange of their respective skills and expertise (p. 24). According to Yeatman, such a partnership assumes that their neither party can do its work adequately without the others’ input. Accordingly, this exchange or partnership has to be integrated into the normal working arrangements of each partner’s institution. Activist teacher professionalism across the whole profession (from primary schools to universities), requires that whole school and individual capacities have to be incorporated into discussions with university teacher educators, union officials and systems and employing officials about strategy, processes and outcomes for improving teacher professionalism.

The political strategy of partnership work involves advocacy, network facilitation and mobilisation. Partners who are activist professionals have and are seen to have intellectual and political resources and expertise that can be mobilised and harnessed whenever necessary. Significantly, it should also be recognised that from time to time, each of the partners need the autonomy and political space to act alone. On other occasions, though as the need arises, partners will mobilise collectively and act in concert. At a time where teacher bashing is a national and international sport and when teacher shortages are imminent, it is crucial that stories of teacher and student success are written and circulated along with stories of local solidarity, trust and resistance. New alliances can be given voice and presence through the emergence of locally grounded social movements. Union participation in these can be developed. However, as Priven and Cloward (1979) concluded thirty years ago, the success and failure of American social movements struggling for social change, depended not on organisational prowess but on the ability to disrupt. Disruptiveness and advocacy are complementary strategies. Advocacy is, in this respect, central to partnerships that embody and promote activist professionalism.

Networks are a second way for partners involved in education to direct the agenda of teacher professionalism. They derive great power and energy from offering members a voice in creating and sustaining a group in which their professional identity and interests are valued (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Networks of activist professionals sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and histories; and promote opportunities for diverse groups to work together. These networks can develop through already existing professional or industrial associations or by coming together to review specific needs (being disestablished once their political project has been achieved) or a slow and evolving process that requires

continuing oversight and governance. The organisation of the Innovative Links project through roundtables of 5 schools provided teachers with a range of opportunities for teachers to network with colleagues from other schools and to establish learning conversations. As the project became more established, the learning conversations change. One teacher from Holy Eucharist Primary school in an outer suburb of Melbourne reflected:

...it was only when we started getting pieces of writing from the other schools that we started being able to have learning conversations. People were able to read about what was happening in the schools and ask questions about what was happening. We had an evening forum last year which started off with teachers talking about what schools had been doing. It changed from reporting to discussing what is happening and trying to work through substantial questions dealing with change.

When networks, coalitions and partnerships last long enough, they develop into ongoing learning communities, into deeply embedded cultures that are based on mutual knowledge, learning and collaboration. This replaces transmitting knowledge from one institution to another. When these cultures are focussed on critical issues of school reform, they place educational practice at their centre, providing the kind of social and professional nourishment that leads many members to invest time, effort and commitment far beyond what they give to the usual professional development opportunities (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996: 41). Communities of critical friends develop during the course of the partnership work. In the case of the Innovative Links project, the role of the critical friend is often considered to be of greatest significance for teachers working with academic colleagues during the writing-up stage of action research projects. Currie et al. (1996) in their evaluation of the second phase of the Innovative Links project comment that

It is helpful (but not always comfortable) to have a critical friend who will challenge the assumptions on which the project is based, to clarify the language being used or to identify any contradictions in the proposed study. . . . The process works most effectively where an atmosphere of trust develops between critical friends and members of the action research team. (p. 11)

Indeed the tension that sometimes emerges through the observations and interventions of a critical friend can be productive and lead to new insights and opportunities not previously apparent to other parties.

#### *Practitioner research*

Activist professionalism is founded not only on principles of mutual exchange, reciprocity and working together, but also on shared inquiry into patterns of practice. Such practitioner research is concerned with under-

standing and improving practice; and provides a way for teachers to come to know the epistemological bases of their practice.

The Innovative Links project in particular has demonstrated how teacher inquiry gives teachers opportunities to break with conventional wisdom about the nature of practice itself and stimulates them to rethink how they can improve their practice. Moreover, there is clear evidence from this project that when teacher inquiry is complemented by academic research, then new types of knowledge can be produced and new forms of professionalism can be initiated among teachers and teacher educators. As Soltis (1994) observes, such projects provide teachers and academics with opportunities to develop a common language and multiple conceptual frameworks for exploring and reflecting upon what happens in classrooms.

Through projects facilitated by the NSN and The Innovative Links, teachers and some of their academic colleagues have developed new skills which have enabled them to take an active role in their own professional development. These include:

- establishing and developing new roles (critical friend, resource person, sounding board, advocate etc);
- establishing new structures (advisory groups, course writing teams, paper writing teams);
- working on new tasks (proposal writing, documenting practices, curriculum planning, public presentations);
- creating a culture of inquiry, where professional learning and dissemination are expected, sought after, rewarded and made an integral and ongoing part of institutional and personal life.

The experience of the NSN and the Innovative Links projects has shown how action research can enable teachers to ask critical questions about their practice and to undertake systematic means of inquiry in order to understand or improve their practice. Professional conversations have emerged between groups of teachers and academics involved in research projects about the nature of practice and theory. Schratz and Walker (1995: 108) capture the nature of theory and its relevance to practice and its improvement:

Often we talk as though 'theory' were some kind of optional extra – a little used switch on the researcher's dashboard to be used, perhaps, only when driving on campus. Here we are suggesting quite the opposite – that theory is implicit in all human action.

Working with teacher researchers entails recognising that there are two different forms of theory. One takes its authority from the academy and the other is implicit in everyday life (Schratz & Walker, 1995: 112). Becoming an activist professional means providing for capitalising on opportunities

for insights gained through understanding everyday life to filter into daily practices in classrooms, schools and universities.

A central but unacknowledged dimension of school based research is “whose questions get put on the research agenda?” This issue stands at the core of whether research attempts succeed or fail. If the research questions are posed by outsiders, such as academic researchers, then the research findings often have little effect on the classroom practices of teachers and the learning outcomes of students in schools. Collaborative research between teachers and academics, where the research questions are posed collaboratively, can have a significant impact on classroom practice (see Dadds, 1995; Sachs, 1999).

There are many reasons for participating in teacher research. These include: promoting change, improving practice and student learning outcomes, and contributing to knowledge construction which in turn enhances the status of teachers by formalising the knowledge base of the profession. Collaborative research between teachers and academics also provides each of them with the opportunity to adopt an outsider’s or stranger’s point of view, in relation to each other’s professional world. This in turn stimulates informal and ongoing professional renewal for both parties.

Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that not being submerged in experience allows one to live more fully, being more consciously, more aware of the contingency, choice and “otherwiseness” of daily life. In a school context this could mean that one of the contributions an academic might make in a collaborative enterprise is to point out aspects of practice that teachers who are immersed in the hurly burly of school life might overlook. Asking questions about the nature of practice and encouraging teachers to elaborate their own perspectives or theories-in-action about their own and others’ practice could help new practices and opportunities to emerge. Opportunities for ‘seeing anew’ can emerge from both formal and informal conversations. Similarly, professional development opportunities for academics emerge as they become involved in understanding the nature of life in schools. By engaging in collaborative work with teachers their own academic and ‘everyday’ ‘theories’, come to be debated and challenged. New and more challenging forms of professional association will begin to emerge as a result of this joint work and inquiry. Knowledge starts to be constructed collaboratively by teachers, students, administrators, parents, and academics. The contribution that action research and action researchers make to professional knowledge is not narrowly technical, nor is it restricted to the production of ‘findings’ but rather it raises

fundamental questions about curriculum, teachers' roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling (Noffke, 1997).

Teacher research and collaborative research partnerships move professional and public discourses about schooling beyond traditional technical notions of professional development as inservice training and create spaces for new kinds of conversations to emerge. They provide opportunities for academics and school based colleagues to engage in public critical debates about the nature of practice, how it can be communicated with others and how it can be continually improved.

Such an activist teacher professionalism does not only call for new kinds of teachers in new school cultures and structures. It also calls for new kinds of teacher educators, new cultures in schools of education, and altered university structures for academics. Changing the culture and structure of the schools may look like a very difficult task, but it is not totally impossible (Soltis, 1994: 255). An activist teacher professionalism will also require new forms of affiliation and association between systems and union officials, as well as opportunities for all parties to come together on 'neutral' ground that has not been tainted by previous experiences, prejudices and left-over ideological baggage.

For teachers, activist professionalism means reinventing their professional identity and redefining themselves as teachers within their own schools and the wider education community. It means that they rethink their social relationships and pedagogical practices within and outside of schools. This is no small task, as it means questioning and shedding previously cherished values and beliefs. Similarly, for teacher educators, activist professionalism requires personal and professional changes. This reinvention is along the lines of what Liston and Zeichner (1992: 188) describe as social-reconstructionist teacher educators should be:

- directly involved in a teacher education program in some capacity;
- engaged in political work within colleges and universities;
- actively supportive of efforts within public schools to create more democratic work and learning environments;
- engaged within professional associations and in relation to state education agencies;
- working for democratic changes aimed at achieving greater social justice in other societal and political arenas.

For union officials and people working in educational bureaucracies, activist professionalism demands that they develop new strategies for communicating with their constituencies, which are collegial, respectful and strategic. Finally, for parents and other community members, activism means that they feel confident to work with others groups such as teachers,



teacher educators, unionists and bureaucrats in inclusive and reciprocal ways.

The future challenge is to create the political and professional conditions where new cultures can emerge and be sustained in schools, education bureaucracies and faculties of education in which teacher research is rewarded and respected instead of being placed at the margins of university priorities. This type of work exemplifies the work of activist professionals working *in situ*.

## CONCLUSION

Activist professionalism anticipates that teachers and others who are interested in education will be able to defend and understand themselves better. As Bottery (1996) argues, this activist orientation comes from educators understanding their practice, but also from understanding themselves in relation to the society in which they live. Activist professionalism is not for the faint hearted. It requires risk taking and working collectively and strategically with others. Like any form of action, it demands conviction and strategy. However, the benefits outweigh the demands. The activist professional creates new spaces for action and debate, and in so doing improves the learning opportunities for all of those who are recipients or providers of education.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The NSN is a reform network which involves over 200 schools across primary, secondary, state, catholic and independent sectors in all Australian states. All schools associated with the NSN are bound together by a common set of principles, ideas and ideals which are based on the question "what is it about the way schools are organised that gets in the way of student learning?"

The Innovative Links project has provided the opportunity for 14 universities, across 16 campuses, representing all Australian states and one territory to be involved in a project that has as its core feature the idea of partnerships between practicing teachers on a whole school basis and university based teacher educators. This is approximately one third of universities in Australia involved in a coherent teacher professional development project. Added to this are some 100 schools which include state, independent, catholic representatives and some 80 academic associates. See Sachs (1997) Reclaiming the Agenda of Teacher Professionalism: an Australian experience, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 23(3) for more detail about these projects.

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