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# Through the Eyes of Novice Teachers: Experiences with Professional Cultures Within and Outside of Neoliberal "No-Excuses" Charter Schools

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**ABSTRACT**

As neoliberal education reforms spread globally, including the development of school choice pathways that create different types of schools, a reexamination of teacher professionalism may be in order. Current literature about teacher experiences with neoliberal reforms often focuses on negative aspects of organizational professionalism and managerialism, describing shifts in professionalism as stifling teacher autonomy and diminishing satisfaction through increased accountability, standardization, and supervision. However, studies often only examine single school sites and the views and experiences of veteran teachers. This study considers two novice teachers' experiences as they transition between schools, one with more traditional professional cultures and the other within the hyper-neoliberal professional contexts of 'no-excuses' charter schools, contrasting how they interpreted aspects of professionalism, development, and satisfaction in different environments. Compared to more traditionally professional school environments, novices' experiences with managerial approaches to teacher professionalism served to accelerate their development while having drawbacks in terms of workload and turnover. The collaboration and collegiality, bounded autonomy, and shared accountability to mutual goals at these "no-excuses" charter schools seemed to create occupational professional subcultures where novice teachers feel simultaneously challenged and supported. The paper discusses implications for reexamining neoliberal approaches to teacher professionalism, mobility, and school organization.

**KEYWORDS**

Teacher professionalism; teacher turnover; teacher induction; school organization; charter schools; managerialism.

## INTRODUCTION

Decades of global reform have increased the prevalence of neoliberal approaches to managing public service sectors, including teaching (Connell et al., 2009; Evetts, 2011). For example, neoliberal ideas, which emphasize market forces, privatization, and choice to spur efficiency, competition, and innovation of formerly public services, have led to the creation of school choice initiatives, such as charter schools and vouchers, in the United States. Simultaneously, standards and accountability reforms over the past several decades (see Coburn et al., 2016) have had a profound cascading impact on teaching and schools, such as initiatives or mandates that promote the standardization of teaching, close supervision and observation of classrooms, and increased accountability to standardized tests (Zeichner, 2010). This neoliberal approach to school management, sometimes called managerialism (Pollitt, 1990) or performativity (Ball, 2003), has changed the very core of what it means to be a teacher.

Current narratives cast neoliberal reforms as threats to teacher professionalism (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Ravitch, 2013) as scholars are concerned that increased surveillance and diminished teacher autonomy negatively impact teacher morale and agency (Brass & Holloway, 2019; Hall & McGinity, 2015; Ravitch, 2013). Ball (2003) argues that neoliberal reforms are a "terror" that will result in feelings of inauthenticity, individualization, depleted collaboration, and anxiety or shame from performance evaluation among teachers. Beyond scholarship, these issues have manifested in other ways, particularly how teachers' unions have made attacking such reforms central issues in recent teacher strikes across the United States (i.e., Medina & Goldstein, 2019). Evetts (2009) conceptualizes the current reforms as pushing the teaching profession away from the collegial authority and internal regulation of *occupational professionalism* and towards a new or *organizational professionalism* characterized by a loss of autonomy and external controls (see Table 1 in the following section for more detail).

However, rather than resist such efforts at reshaping teacher professionalism, many "no-excuses" charter schools [NECS], which I describe further in the literature review, have fully embraced this neoliberal management approach as a core function of how they operate and define professionalism within their buildings (Pondiscio, 2019; Sondel, 2015; Torres & Weiner, 2018). Teachers view the professional cultures, or the shared values, beliefs, habits, attitudes, and approaches that shape teacher actions and define what it means to be and act as a professional teacher within a particular school context (Chipaco & Branco, 2018), of such schools as distinct from traditional public schools (Weiner & Torres, 2016). A small but significant set of studies suggests the possibility that these managerial approaches can be perceived differently, even preferably (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Torres & Weiner, 2018) by newer generations of teachers (Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wilkins, 2011)

With such findings in mind, Weiner (2020) suggests that instead of choosing sides and rushing to condemn neoliberal schools and approaches to teacher professionalism, there might be something that the field can learn by studying these new professional cultures. This point

seems especially pertinent given that some studies that look at the impacts of neoliberal management approaches on teacher professionalism tend to focus only on the United Kingdom (i.e., Ball, 2003 or Evetts, 2011) and veteran teacher experiences (i.e., Hall & McGinity, 2015). Furthermore, *comparisons* between approaches to teacher professionalism are also scant, as studies tend only to examine the implementation of neoliberal reforms in single-school contexts and with teachers who have not experienced different professional cultures. This "grass is greener" dilemma, where teachers studied lack a comparative reference point to interpret their experiences, limits definitive conclusions about the impacts of such approaches to professionalism.

To address these limitations and expand the knowledge base about how different teachers experience such professional cultures, I followed two novice teachers who left their school after their first year for schools with radically different professional cultures. By investigating how they experienced these transitions, I hope to throw light on the potential benefits and shortcomings of apprenticing novices into occupational and organizational communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), especially regarding instructional development and professional values.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

### Conceptions of Professionalism

Scholarly works that examine intersections between teacher professionalism and neoliberal education reforms frame changes in the field as two ideal forms of professionalism: occupational professionalism and organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009).

**Table 1.** Ideal types of Professionalism in knowledge-based work (Evetts, 2009, p. 263)

| Organizational Professionalism | Occupational Professionalism |
|---|---|
| ● Discourse of control used by managers<br>● Standardized procedures<br>● Hierarchical structures of authority<br>● Managerialism<br>● Accountability to external forms of regulation and performance review | ● Discourse constructed within professional groups<br>● Collegial authority<br>● Discretion and occupational control of work<br>● Practitioner trust by clients and employers<br>● Controls operationalized by practitioners<br>● Professional ethics monitors by institutions and associations |

Occupational professionalism is typically associated with publicly trusted fields such as medicine or law, where practitioners have extensive autonomy and discretion and self-regulate from within. Descriptions of occupational professionalism emphasize the importance of relationships between clients and practitioners (Evetts, 2009, 2011) and among professionals themselves, such as collaboration, collegial respect, and shared authority. Notably, establishing

occupational professionalism requires a knowledge base from which practice and extensive preparation and apprenticeship for newcomers are based (Evetts, 2009, 2011). In addition, education scholars tend to portray occupational professionalism as an ideal for teaching (Brass & Holloway, 2019; Ravitch, 2013), as schools with such professional cultures have shown to be related to creating positive learning environments for students (Weiner & Higgins, 2017).

However, many have also raised questions about the existence of a knowledge base for teaching (Grossman et al., 1989; Hiebert et al., 2002) and how the knowledge we do have is used by teachers (Richardson & Placier, 2001) or in teacher preparation (Deans for Impact, 2020).

In striving to reach the ideals of occupational professionalism in teaching, scholars have called for extending and strengthening both preservice (Holmes Group, 1986) and in-service (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) teacher development and encouraging more teacher collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Concurrently, scholars encourage teachers to resist neoliberal reform efforts to externally regulate their practice (Brass & Holloway, 2019; Ravitch, 2010, 2013;).

O*rganizational professionalism* (Evetts, 2009), which scholarship links directly to neoliberal education reforms, is presented as diametrically opposed to *occupational professionalism* (Connell, 2009). Such professional environments align practitioners towards the organization's goals and approaches rather than those of the larger occupation. In such contexts, teachers are professionally obligated towards the school rather than to teaching more broadly. Organizational professionalism is characterized by "discourses of control," standardization, and surveillance (Evetts, 2009), manifesting in practice as standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and other accountability measures that scholars argue deprofessionalize teaching (Milner, 2013).

**Traditional Professionalism in U.S. Schools**

Despite attempts at reform in American schools, such efforts have fallen short of goals to close achievement gaps or raise student achievement (Mitchell & Lizotte, 2016). The disorganization of the education system and teacher professional norms often come into conflict with such efforts. Not only is the education system in the United States highly decentralized and fragmented (Spillane, 1996), but the teaching profession has a long legacy of privacy (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975) where teachers still exercise high levels of discretion over what and how they teach (Archibald & Porter, 1994; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). This loose coupling between system policies and instruction (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) means that teachers can ignore or superficially comply with reform efforts (Coburn, 2004; Lacey, 1977), especially as teacher dismissal or unsatisfactory evaluations remain extremely rare (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017).

Although not *exemplifying* occupational professionalism, schools in the United States have aligned with or strive to preserve elements of occupational professionalism in how they have resisted and remain unchanged by external regulation while maintaining wide-ranging

instructional autonomy. Therefore, I use schools with these more traditional professional cultures to understand novice teacher experiences with occupational professionalism elements in contrast to their experiences in the more organizationally oriented NECSs.

**No-Excuses Charter Schools and Organizational Professionalism**

Charter schools, which are publicly funded schools that operate outside of traditional public-school systems, have proliferated over the past 30 years as a neoliberal school choice reform meant to spur innovation through competition between schools. Authorizers, or governing bodies such as state or local boards, review and grant charters or contracts to groups to open schools. These agreements include accountability expectations for the reauthorization of the school's charter every few years. In exchange for this external accountability, charter schools can generally run their schools as they see fit.

"No excuses" schools, a term popularized in the early 2000s (Carter, 2000; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003), are a common form of charter school that has shown particular success in raising standardized test achievement for low-income and minority students in the United States (Cheng et al., 2017). NECSs typically hold that all children are capable of learning and that poverty is not an *excuse* for poor academic achievement. This belief is based on observations that teachers too often use race and poverty as reasons to lower expectations for their students and lower the rigor of their instruction, effectively shortchanging already disadvantaged students. As such, "no-excuses" approaches hold that teachers and schools should take more responsibility for student learning.

NECSs approach teaching, learning, and school organization in a hyper-managerial way, making them perhaps the most organizationally professional schools in the United States. They have highly structured environments where charter management organizations (CMOs), such as KIPP or Success Academy, determine network-wide goals and visions of teaching and pass these on to teachers through various systems. Standardization of practice is common in NECSs, such as implementing schoolwide discipline systems (Golann, 2015) or having a standardized curriculum across classes (Mehta & Fine, 2019; Pondiscio, 2019; Sondel, 2015). They also typically share a common language and vision of teaching (Ellison & Iqtadar, 2020), often emphasizing direct instruction (Mehta & Fine, 2019; Sondel, 2016), though some research suggests that this instructional narrative may be changing (Harrison, 2022). Additionally, teachers in NECSs are frequently observed, publicly share assessment results, and engage in data-driven instruction based on standardized test results (Lake et al., 2012; Sondel, 2015, 2016).

Though coming under extensive debate and critique for how they may perpetuate inequity or deprofessionalize teaching (Ellison & Iqtadar, 2020; Lack, 2009), NECSs represent microcosms of managerialism unseen in more traditional school settings, making them ideal locations for studying teacher experiences of organizational professionalism.

### Novice Teacher Experiences of Professional Cultures

Given the different needs of novice teachers, they may experience these organizational and occupational professional cultures differently from more veteran teachers. Some work suggests that "veteran-oriented" school cultures which promote traditional individualistic and autonomous conceptions of teacher professionalism exacerbate novice teachers' struggles (Williams et al., 2001). On the other hand, novice teachers have described having autonomy despite constraints from neoliberal reforms (Hall & McGinity, 2015; Wilkins, 2011), which may even promote their development (Stone-Johnson, 2014). Torres and Weiner's (2018) study of early-career teachers in mostly NECSs found that they experienced this "new professionalism" positively, noting that observations and accountability cultures guided and supported their development.

The literature on how teachers experience organization professionalism is severely limited, as Weiner points out, by how "few researchers have considered whether there may be less negative, or even positive, reasons why educators might embrace parts of the new professionalism" (2020, p. 448).

It is within this framework that I explore the following questions:

- How do novice teachers experience organizational approaches to professionalism in neoliberal no-excuses charter schools compared to the more traditional occupational professional cultures at other schools?
- What might this tell us more broadly about the potential benefits and pitfalls of these approaches to teacher professionalism?

## DATA AND METHODS

I collected the data used in this study as part of a more extensive study examining the intersection of school organization, teacher beliefs, background experiences, and contextual influences on instructional practice. Unexpectedly, the professional environments became a dominant theme of the data, especially how teacher experiences in schools with different professional cultures framed teacher development.

### Sample

I located participants through informal school connections, reaching out directly to principals to find teachers within their first two years of teaching who were either entering or leaving a NECS. Next, I contacted individual teachers about participation and consent. Out of four teachers contacted, two agreed to participate.

The two novice teachers examined in this study had several common characteristics and critical differences (see Table 2 below for comparison and timeline), allowing for comparative analysis via multiple case study methodology (Stake, 2013). Entering their second years of working in schools, both teachers had graduated from university-based teacher preparation programs (TPPs), completed their student teaching in selective-enrollment schools in urban areas, and taught in the same midwestern city. Both were in transition, moving from one school

to another between their first and second years. Both teachers taught in a NECS for one year, and both returned to teach in the high school they attended.

At the time of this study, Mr. Ross[1] was a white male entering his second year after spending his first year teaching middle school social studies at a NECS named Edwards Prep. As a student from an affluent suburb who attended religious private schools during his childhood, Mr. Ross' biography stood in stark contrast to the students he taught at Edwards Prep, serving primarily low-income, Black, and Latino students. After a year of teaching, he left the NECS Edwards Prep and returned to the private school he attended, Chapman Academy, to teach high school history.

The other novice teacher in the study, Ms. Baez, had a very different background. A Latina woman who grew up in a working-class neighborhood, Ms. Baez attended a traditional public school (TPS) during grammar school. She then matriculated into Grimm College Prep for high school, a NECS in a different charter network than Edwards Prep. Grimm College Prep was in her neighborhood and primarily served a low-income Latino student population. After completing college with a certification to teach secondary English, Ms. Baez enrolled in a one-year program where she worked as a teaching assistant in a 9th grade English classroom at Montero High School, a TPS near the neighborhood where she grew up. After one year at Montero High School, Ms. Baez took a 9$^{th}$ grade English teacher position back at Grimm College Prep.

The sample's limitations, particularly the small size and significant differences in participant positionality, mean that generalization to conditions in all NECSs or for all novice teachers is impossible. However, the experiences in these cases, taken in tandem with evidence from other studies, may contribute to a broader understanding of teacher experience in neoliberal professional settings and give insights into how and why contexts are differently experienced by different teachers.

**Data Sources**

Starting in August of 2019, I collected data about teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in different schools between their first and second years in the classroom.

During the summer of 2019, teachers first completed a modified version of the Learning from Leadership survey (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). The results informed questions in semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995), which lasted about one and a half hours and covered a wide range of issues, including their experiences during their first year in the classroom and their own experiences as students.

[1] All participant and school names are pseudonyms

**Table 2.** Participant Biographical Timeline

| | Biographical Information | Teacher Preparation | First Year after College | Second Year after College |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ms. Baez** | · Latina, female<br>· First-generation college student<br>· Raised in urban working-class neighborhood<br>· Attended **TPS** for grammar school<br>· Attended **Grimm College Prep (NECS)** for high school | · Undergraduate, university-based program<br>· Completed student teaching at urban, selective enrollment high school | **Montero High School (TPS)**<br>· Teaching assistant in a 9th grade English class through 1-year service program | **Grimm College Prep (NECS)**<br>· Taught 9th grade English |
| **Mr. Ross** | · White, male<br>· Highly educated parents<br>· Raised in affluent suburb<br>· Attended **private school** for grammar school<br>· Attended **Chapman Academy (P.R.)** for high school | | **Edwards Prep (NECS)**<br>· Taught middle school social studies | **Chapman Academy (P.R.)**<br>· Taught high school social studies |

*Note.* Acronyms after school names describe school type: traditional public school (TPS), no excuses charter school (NECS), magnet or selective enrollment (S.E.), and private religious (P.R.)

During the following fall semester at their new school, I observed each teacher twice, watching each teach for approximately 8 hours. Debrief interviews, typically lasting about a half-hour, followed each observation. These semi-structured interviews asked general questions about the teachers' lessons and their experience in their new school.

Final follow-up interviews took place in January of 2020. For comparative purposes, many of the final interview questions mirrored those asked in the initial interview, with some additional questions based on a follow-up Learning from Leadership survey and other considerations. Additionally, these final interviews probed further into comparing the two different school contexts concerning their experiences, job satisfaction, and instructional development. Finally, to avoid imposing my personal beliefs onto the data, I used a synthesized member checking approach (Harvey, 2015) during the final interview to test initial conclusions by allowing participants to confirm, respond to, and elaborate on preliminary findings.

**Analysis**

Collecting data and writing memos started the analysis in an iterative process where I made preliminary assertions, and more data was collected to confirm, clarify, or revise assertions with each round of interviews (Erickson, 1986). I transcribed interviews and wrote in-depth memos (Charmaz, 2006) between each interview and observation to note trends, craft interview questions, and focus observations on emerging themes.

After data collection, I analyzed interview transcripts using a hybrid coding approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process was both inductive, integrating data-driven codes, and deductive, using theory-driven codes. First, I used relevant concepts from the literature about professionalism and neoliberalism to create categorical codes (Charmaz, 2006). Examples of these categorical codes include *Supervision*, *Standardization*, *Accountability*, and *Collaboration* and the potential consequences of organizational professionalism such as *Workload*, *Individualization/Competition*, and *Regulative Pressures*. Next, categorical codes emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), such as *Enabled Practice, Instructional Resources, Teacher Development, Normative Pressures*, *and Instructional Coaching*. I then created focused codes (Charmaz, 2006) within each categorical code to capture teacher experience and interpret the different schools' professional cultures. For example, within the *Instructional Resources* categorical code, focused codes were developed such as *Provided Curriculum as Enabling*, *Provided Curriculum as Constraining*, *Lack of Curriculum as Developmental Opportunity*, and *Lack of Curriculum as Burdensome*.

Claims were determined based on trends and themes that emerged from this final round of focused coding. With these claims developed, I conducted a purposeful search for discrepant cases (Maxwell, 2013) with full and un-coded interview transcripts to ensure the assertions' accuracy.

## FINDINGS

**Experiences with Professionalism in No Excuses Charter Schools.**

Despite being at different NECSs in different Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) and in different grade levels and content areas, both Ms. Baez and Mr. Ross had similar experiences that aligned closely with the neoliberal elements of organizational professionalism. Additionally, despite teaching in different CMOs, both schools were demographically similar, both serving students who were predominantly Black and Latinx and who came from various schools from across the city as neither campus has a NECS “feeder” school at the time of this study. Using aspects of organizational professionalism and neoliberal reforms in education from the literature and coding, I describe how each novice teacher interpreted these professional cultures.

***Standardization in NECS.***

Both Mr. Ross and Ms. Baez described NECS environments with a common goal of preparing students for college, a shared instructional language and vision, and semi-standardized

curricular materials. Both Edwards Prep and Grimm College Prep had standardized discipline systems consistent across classrooms using punitive consequences to manage behavior. Teaching methods at each also emphasized highly teacher-directed instruction that was skill-focused and carefully scaffolded. In describing teaching at NECSs, both teachers also employed a shared language using many terms to talk about teaching, much of which originated in texts such as *Teach Like a Champion* (Lemov, 2010). Schools provided curricular materials to both teachers, though the extent to which they perceived that they could modify and stray from these curriculums varied.

***Autonomy and Discretion***

Each teacher had slightly different experiences with perceived autonomy regarding what and how to teach and classroom management. Both teachers expressed variation in how they implemented the discipline systems, applying the rules in ways they found fair and authentic. The curriculum was far from "scripted" in either case, as both teachers had some autonomy in its creation and delivery. Ms. Baez had considerable independence in using what she called the "baseline curriculum," not as a mandated curriculum but as a proven resource that she was free to use, modify, or disregard. Mr. Ross explained that at Edwards Prep, he had "almost no autonomy" when it came to making curricular decisions, having only the "flexibility...to modify where [the school] wanted it to be modified." Even so, he described "mak[ing] a ton of adjustments to the actual materials," keeping the parts he liked and supplementing or modifying about half of the daily lessons.

As the study progressed, both teachers expressed growing desires for autonomy and acknowledged that having bounded autonomy in these "micro-autonomous spaces" (Wilkins, 2011) was helpful for their development. Mr. Ross explained that, when looking back at his NECS experience, "I wish I had more [autonomy], but honestly, I was so overwhelmed sometimes. It was nice that I just kind of know what I had to do every day," adding that though standardization was constraining, he "viewed it as 'this is saving me time lesson planning and I've already got a million things on my plate.'" Ms. Baez shared similar sentiments, explaining that "the more and more [she got] into teaching, the more [she] realiz[ed] how important [autonomy] is," pointing out that curricular resources and limited autonomy were a necessary developmental scaffold.

***Supervision, Inspection, and Evaluation***

Both Mr. Ross and Ms. Baez experienced pervasive supervision at the NECS, particularly the frequent classroom observations by school administrators, as generally positive and investments in their professional development.

At Grimm College Prep, Ms. Baez was observed by a dean every other week. After observations, they had debrief meetings, which included instructional coaching items such as reviewing past areas of focus, recognizing and praising growth ("I see that you've been working on this"), and giving "bite-sized" areas for improvement. Instead of viewing these sessions as invasive evaluations, she saw them as essential to her development and as an indicator of the

school's professional culture where skillful teaching was valued, believing that "admin in my classroom equates to their investment in what I'm doing."

Mr. Ross's experiences at Edwards Prep were similar. He saw observations and coaching, which happened "constantly," not as surveillance but as growth opportunities. He explained that "at other schools, you might feel like you're being judged and assessed" but that he "really felt like when [administrators] were in there, [he] didn't feel pressure" and that mistakes weren't something to be feared because "they're going to try to work with [him]" to improve.

Both teachers felt that rather than surveillance, these observations and coaching were a critical investment from the school in their professional development, believing that the effort of supervising, tracking, and coaching novice teachers showed that the work they did in the classroom each day mattered.

***Experiences with Hierarchy and Administrators***

Rather than the adversarial relationship between teachers and administrators that one might expect to find in such organizationally oriented professional settings, both teachers described administrators in these neoliberal environments as teammates in achieving the school's mission and serving crucial roles in their mentorship and instructional development.

In describing the principal at Grimm College Prep, Ms. Baez explained that "he was a big reason" that she decided to accept a position at the school because of his approachable manner. She trusted him and explained that this collegial relationship made her feel that he was "someone that [she felt] like [she] could go to" for help and support, similar to her relationship with the dean who observed her class.

Mr. Ross had an even stronger connection with his principal. Whenever the principal at Edwards Prep came up in interviews, Mr. Ross had glowing remarks to share, including that he was "beyond supportive," "incredible," a "major addition" to his professional growth.

Despite intense pressures to perform in the classroom, both novice teachers looked towards administrators at NECSs less as supervisors and more as wise colleagues who pushed their development and served as mentors.

***Competition, Collaboration, and Collegiality***

Some work has expressed concerns about how organizational professionalism emphasizes competition and stifles collaboration (Evetts, 2009; Sachs, 2016). However, across interviews and observations, mentions of competitive relationships with other teachers in NECS contexts were virtually nonexistent. Instead, both teachers in this study expressed extensive and authentic collaboration amongst staff that created professional environments where their input was valued and where teachers' collective knowledge and efforts drove instruction and school, department, or grade-level decisions.

Collaboration at Edwards Prep was "done at a really high level" and was "expected, encouraged, and at points mandated" as part of the professional culture, affirming that "the

culture among teachers [was] incredibly helpful" and an environment where "everyone was there for [him]."

Ms. Baez additionally described how formal and informal collaboration in her NECS context played a role in establishing the school's professional culture and setting organizational expectations. She described the daily importance of working with a veteran co-teacher as crucial for materials, feedback on lessons, advice about students, and generally as a professional role model. More formal collaboration, such as grade-level and department teams, was also described as essential to school operation as teachers were empowered to make collective decisions about policy and instruction.

***Accountability***

Teacher accountability measures were a part of the experience of teaching in the organizationally professional environments of NECSs. However, they were often experienced more as normative pressures (or the expectations sensed and obligations felt within and towards a group of colleagues) than regulative pressures enforced through mandates and policies (Scott, 2001).

Both teachers shared alignment with their respective schools' missions of helping low-income and minority students go to college but had reservations about an overemphasis on standardized test accountability. Though test-based pressures existed, neither teacher indicated that these performance measures exclusively drove their work. Instead, they noted that the real accountability came from the professional culture itself, where working with highly dedicated colleagues committed to delivering high-quality instruction to students every day created intense normative pressures for outstanding personal performance.

Mr. Ross explained that the professional culture set the bar at Edwards Prep, where "there [were] not teachers that [were] slacking off...or not working hard," raised the expectations for all staff and that:

> ... there's just very high standards throughout the school, and you feel accountable to your students, which I think is a good thing. And you know, if your students are wasting time in your class, you're like, 'Oh crap, other teachers here are doing a great job.' … I think it's kind of like I put a lot of pressure on myself. That's kind of where I felt accountable.

Similarly, Ms. Baez's accountability pressures stemmed from her deep commitment to helping first-generation college students and how being "surrounded by people that also want[ed] to strive to be the best" intensified these feelings.

In this way, though the organization may have set overall goals and accountability measures, enforcement and feelings of accountability were most present from internal regulation amongst teachers themselves. Teachers set the standard for effort and dedication, grounded in a deeply held commitment to student learning. Such internal accountability was facilitated by the school's collaborative nature, acting as a conduit for alignment across various

organizational features such as instructional coaching, curriculum, assessment, and the hiring of staff who shared similar visions of educational equity.

**Teacher Reactions to the Professional Cultures**

***Congruence and Inauthenticity***

The tight coupling between goals, instructional vision, and various school elements made confronting neoliberal approaches of organizational professionalism unavoidable for both teachers. Moreover, for both teachers, their experiences as students and the varying degrees of congruence (Coburn, 2004) between their own beliefs about teaching and those of the NECS context influenced how they interpreted organizational professionalism, shaping their overall satisfaction in such contexts.

Mr. Ross, having attended schools with more inquiry-based approaches that emphasized discussion, writing, and critical thinking, found the educational vision at NECS limiting, saying that the emphasis on test results was "problematic." The school's discipline system was the primary reason he left Edwards Prep, feeling that many of the infractions were unjustified, damaged relationships with students, and made him feel "so mean." This incongruence in both teaching and classroom management practices led to feelings of inauthenticity and, coupled with the burdensome workload, resulted in physical and emotional exhaustion that was "unsustainable."

Though Ms. Baez was a product of the NECS school, she also experienced some incongruence and inauthenticity in the NECS environment. She admitted struggles with the provided curriculum and in implementing the discipline system, both of which made her teaching feel inauthentic to an extent. However, Ms. Baez's experiences in her schooling with warm-demander teachers and strict environments led her to trust the system and to find a hybrid way of teaching that respected both her vision of teaching with the expectations of Grimm College Prep. The more extensive, though still bounded, autonomy that she had played an essential role in helping her navigate tensions and rectify dissonance in a way that Mr. Ross could not do in the more rigid and incongruent environment of his school.

***Developmental Scaffolding***

Despite challenges, both teachers saw positives to organizational professionalism, especially how rigid structures scaffolded their development.

A consistent theme across interviews and classroom visits was how the people and systems at NECSs made both teachers feel constantly supported. Having a provided curriculum was a relief to workload issues, with both explaining that they were initially unprepared to meet the full demands of planning high-quality lessons coming out of their preparation programs. This saved them both time and allowed them to focus energy on establishing classroom norms and refining classroom management skills while learning to plan by modifying the existing lessons. Additionally, both teachers attributed much of their development to the instructional coaching and collaboration systems that were part of the NECS's professional cultures.

**Reflecting on Experiences in More Occupationally Oriented Contexts**

This section briefly describes each teacher's time in schools with professional cultures that displayed more occupational professionalism elements. Importantly, these experiences gave them a deeper perspective and a framework to compare and interpret their experiences with organizational professionalism in NECSs.

***Looking Back on Occupational Professionalism from an Organizational Perspective***

During her first year after her TPP, Ms. Baez worked at Montero High School, a traditional public school with a more traditional or occupationally oriented professional culture. Teachers had high levels of autonomy and little external accountability. Administrators were "hands-off," teaching was private, collaboration was nonexistent, and accountability measures, such as observations, were rare and ceremonial.

Teachers at Montero High School actively resisted external regulation, and collaboration across the school was uncommon. Pre-announced classroom observations led teachers to prepare and bargain with students beforehand to engage and participate. Implementing new initiatives was haphazard, exemplified by the attempts at developing a restorative justice program that left the school chaotic and created "a huge rift between teachers and security guards and administration."

This professional environment pushed her to seek something different. As she explained: "the school I always [saw] myself working at was something like [a traditional public high school]…it was definitely like a public school for a very long time. Then I did student teaching in a public school, and I started inching more towards coming back to a [NECS]. When I did last year at Montero High School, I was like, 'Oh, I'm definitely going back to an [NECS].'" These experiences with more traditional or occupational professionalism left her feeling that these school environments were professionally "petty" places where teachers talked down about students and each other and where she would struggle.

After working in the neoliberal context of Grimm College Prep, she looked back more and more harshly at the toxic professional culture at Montero High School. Though she initially described Montero High School as a school with many "teachers [who] were really, really good at their job, but [who] just weren't ever able to reach their full potential," her description changed after a few months in a NECS. Increasingly, she talked about the teachers at Montero in more hostile terms, claiming in the final interview that the "older teachers [at Montero] really just stunk up every meeting" with their refusal to try new initiatives, something she grew increasingly appreciative of in the NECS context.

***Looking back on Organization Professionalism from an Occupational Perspective***

Mr. Ross offered a different perspective as he left the NECS context for Chapman Academy, the private religious school he attended as a student. This environment was not chaotic like Montero High School but had a similar professional culture that more closely resembled the ideals of occupational professionalism.

He described an environment of collegiality and only moderate levels of accountability at Chapman Academy. Teachers exercised extensive discretion in their practice, and Mr. Ross was "shocked" by the "unlimited autonomy" he had at Chapman Academy, "how little guidance" he received, and the fact that no one ever "check[ed] anything [he was] doing." He was "basically given no curriculum" outside of some available textbooks, leaving him to "[build] courses from the ground up." School leaders were "not very hands-on," observing his classes infrequently, the feedback from which he found "wasn't [as] constructive" as the instructional coaching at Edwards Prep. The autonomy and collegiality at Chapman Academy seemed to create a private environment that was "not collaborative at all" and where "everyone [did] their own thing."

However, this was not all negative, as Mr. Ross felt that colleagues would have helped him if requested and that planning courses was a welcome challenge and an opportunity to grow, even if it was "very overwhelming" at times. In general, he felt conflicted in his satisfaction; while he was "really enjoying the job," he felt like his development had stalled, wishing that he was "pushed harder," finding the work "less rewarding and engaging," and missing the "challenge" of teaching at Edwards Prep. He also yearned for opportunities to collaborate with other teachers reflecting on the isolation he felt at Chapman Academy as "[his] least favorite part of the school."

Over time, his recollections of the previous year in a NECS grew increasingly positive. Taking the experiences all together, Mr. Ross looked back and concluded that "coming out of [my TPP], they, Edwards Prep, prepared me. I don't think I felt prepared coming out of [my TPP]." By the end of the study, he was increasingly confident that "if [he] did not have Edwards Prep, [he] really [thought that he] would've been screwed this year" at Chapman Academy as the professional culture in a NECS intensified his growth as a teacher and was like "three years of experience in one."

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current narrative around neoliberal reform's impacts on teacher professionalism revolves around performativity and managerialism as a threat to the ideals of existing teacher professionalism, moving teaching further from an occupational professionalism ideal. Though these two cases cannot make generalizable claims about organizational approaches to professionalism in neoliberal schools, they suggest that performativity demands are not necessarily the problem. Instead, they suggest that individual teacher congruence with the organizational approaches may lay at the root of teacher satisfaction in these performative contexts, providing an opportunity to reconsider organizational professionalism, especially for novice teachers' development.

## Teacher Development in Different Professional Cultures

### *Performativity as Developmentally Positive*

The performativity demands of NECSs seemed not to be a significant issue for either teacher; it was the congruence with the school's overall instructional approach which caused problems, exposing a significant oversight in current thinking that links organizational professionalism to teacher job satisfaction. Mr. Ross left Edwards Prep not because of the supervision and accountability but because of incongruence with the school's discipline system and testing emphasis. Ms. Baez's relative congruence with the approach coupled with the school's bounded autonomy and support allowed her to thrive and improve her practice in a safe yet demanding and professionally satisfying environment.

Contrary to what current thinking would suggest, they described these pressures as overwhelmingly positive and crucial for their development as teachers, not as demoralizing or as a threat to teacher professionalism. Moreover, both teachers were adamant about how the supervision, curriculum, and collaboration in the NECS context supported their instructional growth, considering this a major draw or pull-factors towards teaching in such a professional environment.

These cases suggest that we reconsider performativity experiences alongside the congruence between school approaches and values and individual teachers. Performativity may only be a "terror" when schools force teachers to teach in ways they view as terrible. The performative demands in neoliberal schools and organizational professionalism could even be developmentally appropriate for novice teachers.

### *Traditional Teacher Professionalism as Developmental Stalling*

The teachers' comparisons between organizational and occupational professional contexts indicated that schools with wide-ranging autonomy, lack of oversight, and minimal standardization created either chaotic or unmotivating spaces where novices either floundered or stagnated in isolation. This also runs counter to literature that idealizes aspects of occupational professionalism, suggesting that such wide-ranging autonomy and discretion might be detrimental to novice teacher development (for more on instructional development in these more and less organized contexts, see Waychunas, 2022).

## Subcultures of Occupational Professionalism within Organizationally Professional Neoliberal Contexts

As with a nesting doll, the exterior view of a NECS seemed to be a clear example of organizational professionalism, yet inside lay something different. Considering the impact of neoliberal reforms on teacher professionalism, these teachers' experiences in the NECS contexts suggested a paradox where organizational approaches spurred the development of occupationally professional subcultures where collective responsibility and collaboration flourished within an environment with bounded autonomy for teachers. If occupational professionalism requires a foundational knowledge base and a lengthy apprenticeship period,

then the neoliberal spaces paradoxically built this through managerial methods. Instead of threatening teacher professionalism, managerialism and establishing contexts with organizational professional cultures actually might serve as a pathway towards professionalizing teaching, perhaps a distinct path as theorized by Mehta and Teles (2014) in their description of plural professionalism.

### *Shared Vision, Language, and Knowledge Base Generation*

Clarity around what constitutes good teaching is critical for creating successful schools (i.e., Johnson, 2019). In these two cases, we see how, in organizationally oriented schools, an instructional vision manifests through school structures, such as instructional coaching, curricular materials, and collaborative efforts. The neoliberal approaches to schooling clarified best practices with shared goals, a common language about teaching, and outcome metrics, resulting in the sharing of a knowledge base. The specificity of this vision allowed for the creation, refinement, and transmission of practices and materials that help meet these expressed goals.

As both teachers refined their practice through rounds of reflection, coaching, and revision of curricular materials, they generated their own knowledge bases for teaching, the sharing of which seems possible through extensive collaboration efforts. Additionally, the careful testing, development, and sharing of curriculum described in other literature about NECSs (Mehta & Fine, 2019; Pondiscio, 2019) suggests that schools with cultures of organizational professionalism could contribute to the development of a knowledge base for particular instructional visions.

### *Extending and Strengthening Teacher Education through Scaffolded Autonomy*

Perhaps unexpectedly, these cases suggest that rather than being a threat to the profession by undermining teacher training, neoliberal approaches of NECSs to school organization professionalism, in effect, extended teacher preparation through apprenticeship and scaffolded autonomy. This can address long-standing concerns about teacher preparation being disjointed (i.e., Ball & Forzani, 2009; Denscombe, 1982) and too short (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Holmes Group, 1986).

This occurrence is deliberate and unintentional. The NECSs in this study created scaffolds that directly addressed the typical needs of novice teachers, such as in planning, knowing how to improve one's practice, and classroom management (Veenman, 1984), by providing curriculum, discipline systems, and extensive instructional coaching. Thus, rather than being exclusively stifling, the bounded autonomy gave their teaching direction while allowing them to deliver at least minimally effective lessons. Mehta and Fine (2019) refer to this as creating a "high floor" where resources unburden teachers, with the initial goal being to ensure a standard level of instruction.

While the approaches of NECSs are problematic in many ways, they offer insights into how such organized schools support beginning teachers. The coherent visions of the schools

and the aligned systems and resources created consistency between classrooms and served as a highly scaffolded and developmentally appropriate step for novice teachers' instructional development.

### *Accountability, Collective Responsibility, and Collaboration*

Among the most surprising findings of this study was how the organizational approach to teacher professionalism cultivated environments of responsibility, collaboration, and collegiality.

Both teachers saw themselves as part of efforts greater than themselves. The collaboration and standardization in NECSs created a culture of mutual responsibility towards the school's mission, not just because of top-down mandates or policies, but because teachers felt compelled as an obligation to their students and colleagues. Seeing and working with others who held themselves to such high standards apprenticed these beginning teachers into a collegial and collectively responsible professional culture, meaning that this occupational subculture was internally enforced and powerfully transmitted to newcomers.

Considering how both teachers experienced more traditional teacher professionalism, organizational approaches used in neoliberal schools may not be inherently adversarial towards occupational professionalism. On the contrary, organizational approaches may create a secure environment where occupationally oriented values can take root.

### **Balancing Autonomy, Mobility, Accountability, and School Organization**

While both teachers agreed that the professional culture and organization of the NECSs accelerated their development, their job satisfaction and corresponding mobility decisions were quite different. Teacher congruence with a school's instructional vision played a prominent role in determining satisfaction, with incongruence leading to dissatisfaction and turnover. Yet, despite incongruence and dissatisfaction at a NECS, Mr. Ross still insisted that these schools accelerated his development, raising questions about the relationship between teacher learning, school organization, and satisfaction. Why might this be?

Autonomy seemed to play a mediating role in determining teacher satisfaction. While standardization and bounded autonomy enabled and guided practice, teacher incongruence with the established "bounds" was emotionally taxing, leading to turnover. However, Ms. Baez's semi-congruence with the NECS approaches and more extensive autonomy created a space where she could navigate the conflict between the school's vision and her own beliefs. If these schools had changed their formulas and traded school coherence for absolute teacher autonomy and discretion, how might that have influenced satisfaction, development, and ultimately, individual mobility decisions?

This raises important questions about how much autonomy is appropriate for teachers. When is more structure needed, and why? When are teachers "ready" for more independence? Is this dilemma between teacher autonomy, satisfaction, and turnover at odds with research saying that schoolwide alignment is crucial to improving outcomes (Newman et al., 2001;

Peurach et al., 2019)? How can we balance the seemingly contradictory needs for teacher autonomy and satisfaction while also organizing and improving schools? Shulman (1983) wondered something similar:

> If the responsible and effective teacher must be both free and obligated, how shall we define the proper mix of those typically incompatible virtues? Do we risk tyranny from above to achieve needed order and equity? Or do we foster liberty and autonomy while thereby risking anarchy and chaos?...Can we devise a system in which teachers are both responsible and free? (p. 486)

This is not a simple answer, but neoliberal choice reforms may have a potential solution to offer. Teachers self-selecting into schools whose values they are willing to uphold, as happened with these two cases, could make accountability feel less coercive, raise teacher satisfaction, and create school-wide alignment where occupational subcultures flourish. In this light, teacher turnover could signify burgeoning school coherence as a school aligns its vision with resources and systems, ultimately shedding unaligned staff.

However, satisfaction and turnover are further complicated when considering congruence and creating organized schools. Whether the schools or teachers in each situation have the "right" educational vision is highly subjective. One also cannot assume that teachers will sort into schools with the most equitable visions and practices, just as turnover could be a sign of teachers rejecting an unjust or cruel instructional approach. In this light, teacher turnover, rather than being a sign of coherence taking root, can also signal teachers leaving a mismanaged and chaotic environment.

This suggests we make several considerations when examining efforts at reform and how they balance the often-conflicting demands of teacher autonomy and satisfaction with school improvement initiatives. First, we should not consider teacher turnover to be inherently harmful, nor should teacher satisfaction and retention be assumed to be always desirable. Similarly, creating and maintaining school coherence should be equally scrutinized regarding *what* they are cohering around and *how* they create such alignment. It seems then that as researchers continue to study neoliberal reforms, we should be careful to check our assumptions and examine the biases that we bring to such work while also holding equity and educational justice as a lens that guides our work, not only bringing injustice to light but illuminating facets of excellence that are otherwise obscured by traditional thinking or our own preconceived notions.

These cases are an example of just this: though assumptions about neoliberalism color their appearance from the outside, inside, they offer glimpses of how we might create professional spaces where teachers are both responsible and free while also avoiding the tyranny and chaos Shulman feared. The "no-excuses" model investigated in this study is only one example of a coherent school, as others exist and can be imagined that have different approaches but similarly strong professional cultures (Mehta & Fine, 2019) where teachers can exercise bounded autonomy within environments of accountability.

Future research and reform efforts must be careful in walking this tightrope, ensuring that what we organize around is equitable and promotes educational justice while simultaneously empowering teachers and not compromising too much for the sake of teacher satisfaction and retention. This is not to say that this is an easy task, but as this study suggests, it is possible to create environments where teachers are happy, have autonomy, and are accountable.

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The author discloses no conflicts of interest.

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