On the ontologies of professional learning

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Abstract

While teacher professional learning has become a locus of school reform across many international settings, there is relatively little examination of the ontological assumptions behind the conceptualizations of professional learning in the various policy initiatives that aim to transform teaching practices. Using the conceptual notion of multiple ontologies proposed by Mol (1999; 2004), we argue that teachers enact different ontologies of professional learning as they go about their professional practice. As a consequence, the postulation of multiple ontologies of professional learning requires a shift in how policy makers conceive of and develop strategies aimed at transforming teaching practices. We conclude by examining some policy consequences for educational administrators and teachers when professional learning is viewed through the lens of ontological multiplicity.

Introduction

Discourses on school reform have positioned teacher learning as a key mechanism of educational change and subsequently, professional development has entered the agenda of educational policy makers in several jurisdictions around the globe. The perceived need to align teaching practices with the goals of reform has given visibility to a number of contradictions and tensions between the realities of teaching practices and the realities of educational reform. One of such tensions was explored through an examination of the idiosyncratic ways in which teachers enacted the scenarios of professional learning in a school in rural Alberta in Canada (Riveros & Viczko, 2012). In this paper, we propose that these different ways to enact the scenarios of professional learning suggest the existence of multiple ontologies of professional learning in schools. In particular, we argue that professional knowledge in schools is constituted in the professional practices of the school actors, and thus, if we want to understand the dynamics and processes of school reform, we require a contextualized account of how the scenarios of professional learning are configured in the practices and actions that emerge as school actors enact policy initiatives on professional learning. We note that professional learning in schools is not performed as a single or unitary event that occurs in a single scenario, but instead, we observe that professional learning is ontologically diverse. The multiple ways in
which professional learning is performed suggest the existence of simultaneous enactments of professional learning that coexist in schools.

Our purpose in this paper is to investigate the ontology of professional learning by examining how professional learning is performed in the contexts of teaching and professional development activities. Professional learning is the concern of many policy initiatives in Canada, as it is included as a priority in many provincial, jurisdictional, and school level policies (Author, 2012). Many of these policies have echoed calls in the literature for including a more active role for teachers in the processes of professional development. For example, Wilson and Berne (1999) have indicated that professional learning should “not be bound and delivered but rather activated [italics in original]” (p. 194). This suggests that teachers must be seen as active participants in professional development initiatives instead of passive receivers of information. However, we argue that the idea that professional learning must be “activated” does not address how learning is enacted in the school contexts, that is, how learning is constituted in the practices and actions of school actors. Indeed, conceptualizing professional learning as a process that must be activated implies that the occurrence of professional learning in schools still depends on the active intervention of powerful actors in control of the learning process, and those actors are not necessarily the teachers. We want to reject conceptualizations of professional learning that tend instrumentализate actors and instead we want to propose that professional learning occurs as an emergent process that takes place in the practices and actions of school practitioners. This means that professional learning does not necessarily occur in formal scenarios established with the specific purpose of “activating” learning, but instead this means that professional learning occurs in diverse scenarios of professional practice that are constituted in the multiple socio-material assemblages in which school actors are immersed.

In this paper, we adopt the position that we can understand the ontology of professional learning through policy analysis that considers how policy is enacted (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). In doing so, we draw upon Actor Network Theory (ANT) to focus on the socio-material aspects of professional learning in order to understand how actors in schools make sense of educational policy initiatives by enacting the policies in their practices. In particular we want to argue that exploring the materiality of professional learning would provide novel insights regarding how school actors translate and recontextualize educational policy in their daily work.
We start our argument by briefly reviewing the notion of policy enactment. We contextualize the saliency of examining policy enactment by reflecting on data collected in a study that examined how teachers in a rural school in Alberta, Canada, talked about their professional learning. We note that the teachers in this school, enacted policies of professional learning through their practices and their participation in networked relations with other people and objects. We bring attention to the materiality of professional learning and the diversity of interactions that teachers articulate in their professional practices. Our findings suggest that when professional learning is conceived of in its material multiplicity, we are better suited to understand how educational policy is enacted in the classroom, how teachers’ professional learning emerges in the context of their daily lives and how such learning is embedded into their practice of teaching.

Enacting Educational Policy

Policy has been traditionally understood as a social change mechanism intended to modify people’s behaviours in order to achieve certain desired goals (Shore & Wright, 2011). This rationalist approach to policy processes (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) includes a number of steps or stages such as policy problem definition, design, implementation and evaluation. The underlying assumption there is that policy, seen as an instrument of social change, could solve specific problems (Bacchi, 1999; Wagner, 2007). However, this traditional understanding of policy overlooked the creative role of actors who put the policy into practice, recontextualizing, translating and adapting the policy to their own contexts. Highlighting a shift towards focusing on the enactment of policy, recent work by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) reporting on a study of secondary school policies offered a different picture of policy, one in which policy is brought into existence in complex ways. These scholars effectively showed that school actors develop creative ways to cope with the constraints brought about by policy texts. That is, actors interpret and translate policy ideas into practices in a continuous process of contextualization and recontextualization.

Similarly, Nielsen (2011) used the conceptual tools of assemblage and translation in looking at a case of conflicting subjectivities between ‘customer’ and ‘co-owner’ of a group of Chinese international students studying at a Danish university. The focus in this study was to use an ethnographic approach to policy analysis to look at how “‘peopling’ policy with multi-dimensional actors whose subjectivities are created in the intersections or interactions” (p. 69 –
shows the emergence of policy processes. Doing so, Nielsen drew upon the work of Actor Network Theory scholars Latour (2005) and Law (2009) to argue for a need to pay attention to policy processes as appropriation, whereby policy is seen as a series of translations in which ideas and technologies are transformed when they circulate in institutional contexts. This position is contrasted with the notion of policy implementation, which portrays policies as static and easily transportable without change or effect by human or material agency. By looking at the conflict between the subjectivities of student as consumer and student as co-owner that emerged through the various interactions with policies, agencies and material relations, Nielsen (2011) highlighted the multi-dimensional and interconnected assemblage of the actors involved in enacting policy, arguing that such a study calls attention to how links between policy and subjectivity are enacted in the everyday lives of actors as “a multiplicity of agencies populates the world” (p. 83).

Nielsen’s work shifts the focus of study from a linear, rational and instrumental process to one of translation and recontextualization of the policy by social actors. Similarly, Shore and Wright (1997) conceptualized policy as a scenario of political contestation, bringing the political process to the fore of the analysis. They also rejected discourses that portray policy as a linear sequence that starts by identifying a policy problem, continues with the policy design, and culminates with the policy’s implementation. In Shore and Wright’s account, actors bring a wide range of resources to the political arena in order to make their discourse prevail. The resources drawn by political actors are both discursive and non-discursive, which means that in order to legitimate their voices, actors construct and contribute to different arrangements or networks constituted by people and objects, thus the policy scenario is constituted by numerous socio-material arrangements that generate contexts of action, deliberation and further practice. This picture of policy processes offered by Shore and Wright counters traditional understandings of policy as a linear, mechanistic and hierarchical processes that fail to recognize the way policy is enacted in the socio-material assemblages that take place in schools.

**Analysing Policy Enactments with Actor Network Theory**

ANT focuses on the heterogeneous nature of networks as nodes or links of messy negotiations, conflicts and contestations through which stability and order seem to emerge (Fenwick, 2010; Nespor, 2004). That is, in networks, certain kinds of materials and people are
assembled and translated to become aligned. By “assembled” we mean put together in heterogeneous networks of human and non-human entities and by “translated” we mean the process that happens when things connect, changing one another and forming links (Latour, 1987). While diffusion is used in many institutional theories to explain the movement of an object through space and time, the notion of translation “emphasizes the changes that occur in meanings and interpretations as a physical or social object moves through a network” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 67). In a similar way, Ball, Maguire, Braun and Hoskins (2011) commented that the notion of enactment in policy analysis focuses on understanding the creative processes of interpretation (decoding policy) and translation (recoding policy into practice). They emphasized that translation is “an iterative process of making texts and putting those texts into action, literally ‘enacting’ policy” (p. 620).

According to Law (1992), translation is the process “which generates ordering effects, such as devices, agents, institutions, or organizations” (p. 366). Law (2009) also indicated that the research focus of ANT is to “explore and characterize the webs and the practices that carry them…. [describing] the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors” (Law, 2009, p. 141). In this regard, Nespor (2002) explained how tests of student achievement as instruments of educational policy contribute to shaping educational practices in schools. Teaching and learning processes are translated into test categories that allow for certain types of measurement and that trigger certain types of interpretations. Simultaneously, these interpretations validate specific forms of knowledge in detriment of other forms of knowledge. Policies on high-stakes testing “mobilize a whole series of events and people to align with its forms: administrators force curricula to conform to the test’s demands, teachers drill classes in test preparation, remedial classes are arranged to improve students’ test achievements” (Fenwick, 2010, p. 123). Networks of people and artefacts are assembled to respond to the policy, yet the specific local assemblages in the schools influence the enactment of the policy. This explains why the enactment of the policy differs form school to school.

Similarly, Hamilton (2009) drew upon ANT to explore how a standardized individual learning plan (ILP) that was intended as a formative assessment tool was transformed into an administrative instrument for measurement and quality assurance. Teachers and administrators acted to incorporate the tool into their practices but the introduction of different formats to track
the initiative, and the additional paperwork to synchronize the adoption of the tool across teachers, transformed the tool into accountability practices that diverged from the initial goal of the policy which was to provide a literacy self-assessment tool for individuals.

Such contributions to the study of policy offer a context-sensitive account of the ways in which actors contribute to the political arena by participating in networks of people and objects that enact new forms of social reality. *Reality*, according to Mol (1999), is not stable, given, or universal. She characterized reality as “historically, culturally and materially located” (p. 75) and argued that “‘the real’ is implicated by the ‘political’ and vice versa” (p. 74). This mutual implication suggests that reality is enacted and performed by actors and objects interacting in complex assemblages. That is, reality is multiple and its multiplicity stems from the various networks of actors and objects that enact multiple and sometimes contradictory contexts of practice. The enactments of social realities are relational effects of the diverse assemblages that come together as networks get configured in practice. For example, Mol (1999) indicated that objects are enacted into existence as a relational effect of networks constituted by other objects, practices and people. Cordella and Shaikh (2006) argued that ANT “introduces a new way of conceptualising the understanding of reality” (Cordella & Shaikh, 2006, p. 14), in that a relational ontology theorizes a *becoming* of entities through relations, through interactions between actors. Looking at the relationality of entities suggests we are not just considering the connections between things that already exist but rather seeking to understand how relationality “*actually configures ontologies*” (Fenwick, 2010b, p. 119). In the same vein, Law and Urry (2003) argued that neither relativist nor realist positions reflect the ontological position of Actor Network Theory.

This means we are *not* saying that reality is arbitrary. The argument is neither relativist nor realist. Instead it is that the real is produced in thoroughly non-arbitrary ways, in dense and extended sets of relations. It is produced with considerable effort, and it is much easier to produce some realities than others. In sum, we’re saying that the world we know in social science is both real and it is produced. (p. 5)

Analysing policy enactments with Actor Network Theory requires the adoption of an *ontological* strategy as opposed to an *epistemological* strategy. Law and Singleton (2005) distinguished between these strategies to study objects. The epistemological strategy requires
seeing objects through a particular perspective. Multiple perspectives imply multiple descriptions of a single object, descriptions that can conflict or contradict each other. The ontological strategy moves from “thinking about multiple interpretations of objects […] to think about multiple objects themselves” (p. 334). Law and Singleton noted that realities are “enacted into being” (p. 334) through the actors’ practices. They suggested that the differences between objects must be understood ontologically, in their socio-material relations, highlighting how entities come into being, and not just epistemologically, that is, how objects are represented or interpreted by subjects in their consciousness. An entity is enacted as a reality through the intricate interactions of other entities and practices. One implication of this is that objects are brought to presence in multiple ways: different sets of practices and material relations may enact an object in multiple ways.

A stark example of how the practices enact objects into reality was presented by Law and Singleton’s (2005) study of the treatment of Alcoholic Liver Disease (ALD) they found that the actual object of the disease, the damage of the liver, was enacted differently in the hospital, the substance abuse centre, and the general practitioner’s office. “In the hospital, it is a lethal condition that implies abstinence. In the substance abuse centre, it is a problem that implies regulation and control. In the GP’s surgery, it is a reality that is better than hard drugs” (p. 347). Additional to these different understandings of what is the object of ALD, the diagnosis, the treatment, and the treatment effects were different in the community treatment centre, the hospital and the physician’s office. This incongruence is particularly dramatic because modern evidence-based treatments in medicine operate under the assumption that a disease is a “singular, distinct and identifiable object” (Fenwick, 2010).

Mol differentiated the idea of ontological multiplicity from perspectivalist and constructivist notions of reality. Perspectivalism offers the position that there are “mutually exclusive perspectives, discrete, existing side by side in a transparent space. While in the centre, the object of the many gazes and glances remains singular, intangible, untouched” (Mol, 1999, p. 76). In her view, a constructivist position suggests that “a specific version of the truth got crafted” (p. 76) whereas in perspectivalism, a particular perspective becomes accepted and supported. These views, however, do not question the assumption that reality is singular. According to Mol, accepting the constructivist and perspectivalist stories commits us to accept that that we might have ended up with very different versions or constructs of particular objects,
such as bicycles or keyboards, but “it happens that we’ve come to stick with the ones we’ve got” (p.76), without questioning the ways in which the real is configured or comes to exist. In both cases, the assumption is that there is a single reality that supports these varieties of constructs and perspectives. What changes, according to perspectivalism and constructionism, are our perceptions of reality and the way we come to an understanding of the real in the social world. Contrary to these positions, Mol argued for a multiplicity of ontologies, as related to performance, suggesting “a reality that is done and enacted rather than observed” (p. 77).

Practices and actions become the ways in which realities come to existence. In addition, practices are multiple and are situated in cultural, historical and material contexts, making the resultant realities multiple and diverse. Mol (1999) offered an example of this ontological multiplicity relative to practices in the case of anaemia. She identified at least three ways in which anaemia is performed. First, there is a clinical performance, in the doctor’s office, in which the doctor examines the patient for visible symptoms (e.g. white eyelids, dizziness). Second, there is a statistical performance, where a blood sample taken from the patient is tested for haemoglobin levels and the levels are contrasted against statistical data. If the sample’s levels are lower than the standard levels then the patient is diagnosed with anaemia. Third, there is a pathophysiological performance, in which the patient’s blood is tested to find if, in that particular patient, the haemoglobin levels are enough to transport oxygen through the body. If the levels are low then the patient is diagnosed with anaemia. (Mol, 1999). Mol noted that in practice these three different performances coexist although they may contradict each other. Indeed, sometimes people do not get dizzy or have white eyelids, but nevertheless their haemoglobin levels fall below the statistical average, or their haemoglobin levels drop, but not enough to be deviant relative to the statistics, and so on.

Cases like anaemia show how different realities coexist enacting particular effects. In some contexts where doctors do not have access to laboratory analysis, the clinical performance of anaemia prevails and subsequent practices ensue, such as particular treatments based on the diagnosis. What Mol is offering here is a relational ontology, in which entities are emerging realities enacted in networked interactions. However, multiplicity does not always imply incompatibility. “What multiplicity entails instead is that, while realities may clash at some points, elsewhere the various performances of an object may collaborate and even depend on one another” (Mol, 1999, p. 83). That is, she asserted that if realities exist as relational effects,
then the multiple versions of something that exists in the world must also be relational. They are not plural perspectives that stand apart from each other. Rather, as Mol reminded us, entities are multiple and are performed in the relational spaces that they configure, stating, “one may follow the other, stand in for the other, and, the most surprising image, one may include the other. This means what is ‘other’ is also within. Alternative realities don’t simply co-exist side by side, but are also found inside one another” (Mol, 1999, p. 85). Indeed, our study reveals that there were multiple realities of professional learning coexisting within a particular enactment of a school as a social reality. The teachers in our study were able to move between these realities of professional learning, and in some cases, they were able to bridge or merge them through overarching practices.

Mol’s purpose in focusing on the notion of multiple ontologies is to suggest an ontological politics at play, namely, the idea that “reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term politics works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open ended and contested [italics in original]” (p. 75). She argued that the postulation of multiple realities suggests that “there is, or should be a choice between them” (p. 79). An exploration of ontological politics offers insights into the way a particular reality is chosen over multiple options. In exploring how a particular reality is selected, Mol suggested to investigate where are the options situated and what is at stake when the decision is made. In addition, we need to investigate to what extent there are really options and how should the decision be made. These questions are central in an investigation of the enactment of school realities. One case in which these insights could be useful is the study of policy enactments in schools. In the next section we elaborate on the notion of professional learning and examine how professional learning is enacted in the school.

**Enacting Professional Learning in Schools**

The professional learning literature is conceptually diverse and the practice of professional learning is widely studied. Among this body of literature, we draw attention to the work of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005), who called attention to the different practices embedded in teachers’ learning. They conceptualized the ways in which teachers learn at work through three approaches: individual learning, collaborative learning, and planned learning.
These three methods of learning were then explored through three dimensions influencing the nature of that learning: the dispositions of the individual teacher, the practices and cultures of the subject departments, and the management and regulatory frameworks at school and national policy level. While such a framework for analyzing professional learning seeks to represent the breadth of activities, models and practices taking place in schools, their work rests on a more structural approach to understanding professional learning. However, the notion of professional learning as being embedded in the everyday practices of teachers is one that we would like to explore further.

There appears agreement among educational leaders and scholars that professional development programming for teachers has now shifted “from an earlier conception of change as something that is done to teachers [passive participants] to change as a complex process that involves learning” (Clark & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 948). In this manner, there is a marked shift to focus on the agency of teachers: “from programs that change teachers to teachers as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in professional development programs and in practice” (p. 948). In this sense, scholars have long suggested that teacher learning should “not be bound and delivered but rather activated [italics in original]” (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 194). Providing teachers a new curriculum, for example, is not enough to effect change in teacher teaching and therefore student learning. By helping teachers understand their newly constructed knowledge as they engage with the curriculum documents and various teaching materials, change in teaching may occur.

Following Ball, Maguire and Braun’s (2011) insights, we argue that teachers enact policies of professional learning in their particular contexts of practice. Drawing upon the data collected through interviews with teachers about their professional learning at one rural school in Alberta, Canada, we move to interrogate the ways in which particular enactments of policy demonstrate how teachers respond to policy in novel and creative ways in order to enact their classroom reality. In doing so, we want to question what focusing on enactment of professional learning policies offers to a situated understanding of the way of policies on professional learning are contextualized and translated into practices.

This data presented here were collected through individual interviews with teachers and a focus group held with the teachers interviewed in a research project related to teachers’ professional learning. The teachers that were interviewed in the research project taught in
elementary grades in the school and had varying years of professional experience. They were asked to talk about different initiatives occurring in the school and to elaborate on the ways in which various aspects of professional learning was meaningful to their practice. The interview and focus group data were collated and analyzed, looking ways in which the teachers described various enactments of their professional learning and how such learning was tied to the professional learning policies in the school.

On reflecting about how she has grown through her professional learning, one teacher commented about how she has learned to use a literacy-based program by attending a monthly workshop for the past three years. At these workshops, she worked with a lead teacher and other teachers in the district. At each meeting, they would share ideas of how to use the program and what worked for each teacher in his/her context. She spoke pointedly about how this program made professional learning become “realistic” to her.

Sometimes I found PD to be just so like overwhelming almost, you know where it was just too many things, too many approaches, too many... too much things that were difficult to put into action, if you know what I mean? Like it wasn’t sort of straight forward enough for me, whereas lately it’s been things that you go, “Yeah that’s realistic for me, like I can see how that is a far better way of teaching, but I don’t have to throw out everything I ever did or have known how to do. I just have to tweak the way I’ve been doing it. I now know a better way.’ .... So everything sort of can go back in to this little program without me ever having to throw out all the stuff I did before.

Being able to practice what she had learned was important for this teacher, as she reflected that a particular professional learning initiative was realistic when she was able to apply it to her teaching everyday. In her account, the possibility of action that she identifies in this initiative contributes to shape the reality of her daily practice.

This particular program became a central aspect of her professional learning as she included it on her professional growth plan. In relation to the enactment of policy in the classroom, she talked about how her professional growth plan connected to her professional learning. The structure of the plan has changed in recent years: previously, three goals were identified on the plan; now there is only one goal: the teachers’ individual growth goal. For this
teacher, working on this goal is something she had been doing for a while, but focusing on it through the literacy program tied it, connected it, to her professional growth plan.

My teacher growth plan now just has one goal in it, which is about the posters and displaying the outcomes for students and parents. So I guess [my work on this literacy program] would almost be an unwritten goal that I’ve had for quite a few years and I just keep it as an ongoing goal sort of in my mind. Whereas my PD goal for this year is a new goal. I hadn’t been working on that before, that I actually wrote down and handed in.

In the way this teacher talked, it was possible to see how this professional development initiative enrolled many different actors together in the enactment of her professional learning: the poster, her learning, the professional growth plan.

Writing down the goal on her professional growth plan is significant, as the plan for her learning becomes something visible that she will be evaluated against in her yearly teacher evaluations. However, this is not to suggest that the only way for learning to take place is that it is written down. However, by including it on her professional growth plan, it becomes more than a learning opportunity as it is politicized in the evaluation of her professional learning as a teacher. She reflected that there are many goals for learning that are operating at one time, but the enactment of writing down one particular goal placed it as more important to her professional learning, ordering the learning that is enacted.

Later, she went on to explain how a poster used in this specific literacy program better connected her to the curriculum, stating that the program “is so fabulous for me for teaching. The poster outcomes are so fabulous for me to revisit my curriculum often”. Here we can see a concrete manifestation of the policy initiative integrated in the network of materials and people that enact a particular policy on professional learning. The poster, as a concrete manifestation of the policy, is not just an artefact that entered the classroom, it actively contributed to shape the actions and practices of the people around it. The teacher acknowledged the poster’s influence in her practices and furthermore declared that due to the possibilities of action afforded by the poster, this particular professional learning initiative was more realistic than other initiatives that could not achieve a material manifestation in the classroom. Again, the material poster played a
role in ordering which learning goals take precedence at particular times in the teaching environment.

Another teacher who was interviewed talked about how technology has influenced his learning in that it connected a professional learning initiative to his daily practice of teaching. Here, he elaborated on how this worked in the classroom.

We’re wanting to look at different technologies to use in the classroom kind of things, which we haven’t done a lot of that yet, but we’ve done a few things, but then it’s just having that time to make use and practice. And I honestly I find sometimes too that if we use something, a technology type, that if I can kind of introduce the kids they learn it and they teach me more than I could ever get to them. Which is good, I mean I’d rather have it that way. I’d rather have them know more than I know in the end.

This teacher identified “effective” learning as happening within his own practice of teaching. That is, for this teacher, meaningful professional learning occurs not in learning something outside of the scenarios of teaching practices but in the context of the practice of teaching.

Further to that point, key to this teachers’ professional learning was how the students learned using the technology. That is, the technology enrolled both teacher and student learning. He described a technology program called MapQuest and how he was using it in his daily teaching and how planning to use this technology changed the way he thought about the way in which he planned for his pedagogy. He later went on to say,

Well, for example, with the MapQuest thing, I can apply it to a lesson that I can use for the kids that I think can be beneficial, they’re going to learn something here today or this might help with reading comprehension or maybe this will peak their interest a little bit just to change things up sometimes. Sometimes, it doesn’t have to be something big, but it can be just something that just changes the way you might be doing something a little bit and it might make you, ‘Oh I’ve never thought about that before.’

The introduction of a new object into the classroom context initiates a series of transformations or translations in which actors transform their own practices as they interact with the new artefact. The learning that occurred for this teacher was not situated outside of his practice. The
realities that are enacted in the classroom are thereby transformed by the new socio-material arrangements brought about by the new object and the students’ interactions with the object, and educational policy becomes enacted in the practices of the school actors. From this perspective, the reality of professional learning extends over space and time, a translocal quality (Robichaud & Cooren, 2013) that posits the agency for learning as an action that is always shared, that is, distributed through the actions of others.

**Discussion**

The interviews with the teachers revealed how they enacted two scenarios of professional learning: on the one hand, the formal scenarios, such as the teacher workshops and meetings where they spent some time learning about particular goals or skills, and on the other, their classrooms as informal scenarios of professional learning where they learned about their profession when they engaged in contextualized practices. These two labels are not meant to identify immutable fixed spaces of professional practices. They are meant as points of reference in a spectrum of complex and emerging practices that are configured as the teachers in this school perform the realities of their professional learning.

According to the interviewed teachers, there are important contrasts between their classroom practices as scenarios of professional learning and the formal workshops. Indeed, not everything that was learned in the workshops was translated into their classroom practices. In fact, many teachers noted a disconnect between the activities in the workshops and their classroom practices. In some cases, the information obtained in the workshops was dismissed as irrelevant or “unrealistic” as it could not be translated into concrete classroom practices. However, this was not always the case. In other instances, some teachers managed to connect these two scenarios by selecting the portions of the training that were translated through teaching practices into their classrooms. The teachers enacted these particular realities of professional learning, connecting them through their practices and disconnecting them by dismissing the relevance of the workshops for their professional practice.

Our conceptualization of professional learning suggests that professional learning is enacted in a multiplicity of performances and practices. The interview data suggests that the situations that configure professional learning in this school differ in some cases. For instance, the introduction of a poster as a new instructional tool mobilized specific literacy practices and
enrolled different actors together. A teacher introduced the poster as a component of an instructional initiative that she found to be realistic in the sense that it could be incorporated in her classroom practices. The reality of her professional practices was transformed as the poster entered the classroom. So, what does the notion of enactment offer to the study of the ontology of professional learning? We propose invoking the notion of enactment lays out two insights into professional learning: the heterogeneous nature and the politics of performance in professional learning.

First, by focusing on the enactment of professional learning policies, we suggest that the heterogeneous nature of professional learning is brought to the fore. The focus shifts from the teacher as the sole agential actor, so that we begin to notice other actors at play. For instance, by paying attention to the poster and how its presence in the classroom influences the teachers’ own practices, we recognize that the teacher’s learning occurs not only when she meets with other teachers, but as she interacts with the material world in her classroom: with the poster, with the students, with her professional growth plan, the professional learning policies. Similarly, the teacher who reflected on the use of technology suggested the students’ interactions with the technology contributed to his own practice. That is, professional learning for him occurred in the context of his daily practice, in the interactions between himself, the technology and the students. Contrary to scholars who see professional learning as activated, we argue that professional learning is enacted.

Taking the stance that professional learning is enacted suggests we have to pay attention to what is performed through action. It is here, drawing on ANT, that we aim to show that the focus on the performance of enactment focuses on “actual and situated connections” (Robichaud & Cooren, 2013, p. xv) in order to understand agency. There is no possibility for professional learning without understanding translocal agency that exists in the connections between teachers, students, objects in the classroom, and in this case, policies directed at their professional learning. So, professional learning does not sit passively waiting to be activated. Rather, it must be enacted in the engagements between teachers and other things in their practice of teaching.

The second insight offered by studying the enactment of professional learning relates to the politics of the professional learning that come to be privileged. As we noted before, in this school, professional learning is enacted in at least two different scenarios: formal and informal. We want to add complexity to this distinction by noting that these labels (formal/informal) are
just points of reference in a spectrum of complex performances that emerge as teachers navigate through their professional lives. Mol (1999) argued that the existence of multiple realities implies the possibility to select between those realities. In our study, we identified a wide spectrum of performances that enacted concrete realities of professional learning for the teachers in this school. This spectrum of performances interacts and overlaps with the formal and informal scenarios of professional learning. These performances mutate and change as teachers navigate the complexities of their professional lives. We identified two salient points of reference in the spectrum of performances of professional learning in this school. First, there is what we call the *prescriptive* performance of professional learning in which teachers participate in formal scenarios and receive training that prioritizes the policy goals of the school, district or province. The prescriptive performance takes place in formal scenarios when teachers attend the workshops and activities sanctioned by the administration. For example, in this school there were several events that took place in formal scenarios and were dubbed as professional learning by teachers and administrators. The prescribed performances of professional learning were generally circumscribed to confined spaces and scheduled events, and in many cases, were not translated into classroom practices. One of the interviewed teachers pointed out that the school hosted a number of events that were conceived as events for professional learning, but failed to bring about a meaningful contribution to her teaching practices.

I know that we probably don’t know off by heart what the division goals are for PD and the provincial goals are for teachers, but I know we’ve been told them. I know that of course legally we are working within them, but really we’re being spoon fed that stuff. Today we’re going to work on this because that’s part of the division goal, right, so you just do it. And then the next week you go back to your poster.

An enactment of professional learning that is circumscribed to organizational and administrative constrains, constitutes, nonetheless, a very significant part of the teachers’ professional reality. These occurrences of professional learning are as real as the interactions between the teacher, the students, and the literacy posters. Indeed, some interviewed teachers established a clear distinction between the professional learning that takes place in these formal scenarios and the professional learning that occurs, informally, in the classroom practice, outside the prescribed scenarios. We call this the *creative* performance of professional learning. In this
performance the teacher learns about her profession when she configures and reconfigures her teaching practices in the classroom. What the teacher learns in her classroom experiences does not necessarily reflect the policy goals of the school, district or province, but fulfills other personal expectations and interests in relation to professional development. The creative performance of professional learning enacts a more informal scenario, where professional learning takes place nonetheless.

Obviously, we are not suggesting a simple duality of performances here. These two forms of performance interact and connect in many cases. Some teachers moved between these two performances, going back and forth between the prescribed performance and the creative performance configuring overarching practices that ultimately bridged these two realities of professional learning. For example, the teacher who used the poster as a literacy tool, following her participation in a workshop in a formal scenario, enacted a prescriptive form of professional learning that aimed to infuse a particular literacy program into the schools. However, her selection of the poster as a literacy tool, at the expense of other components of the same program, resulted in the emergence of idiosyncratic practices linked to the presence of this particular artefact in the classroom. In this case, this teacher also enacted a creative form of professional learning that did not necessarily reflect all the objectives of the literacy program, but reflected her professional interests. This is an example of how teachers in this school became mobile and inhabited different realities of professional learning that were performed simultaneously.

Following Mol’s (1999) insights, the notion of multiple realities imply an ontological politics in which realities become options that can be enacted. The political dimension appears once the actors are able to choose between different enactments. The actors in our study were able to enact these different realities; they shifted between performances of professional learning. While there may be numerous motivations for these shifts to occur, we believe these shifts are facilitated or constrained by issues of power and legitimacy within the school. The prescribed enactments of professional learning carry out organizational legitimacy as they are sanctioned by the administration and organized as formal events of professional learning. The capacity to shift away from the prescribed performance and explore different enactments of professional learning could be determined by the capacity of the teachers to leverage the risks of stepping out of the norm and incorporate new practices into their classroom performance. A key difference between
these two performances of professional learning is that in the annual report to the school board the prescribed performance becomes visible and legitimate, the creative performance becomes invisible and disappears.

A study of the multiple enactments of professional learning in schools provides valuable insights into the ways school actors configure spaces of resistance and transformation. This is true of other instances of educational reform, for example, Fenwick and Edwards (2010) noted that in the case of curriculum standards, teachers reconfigure policies in contextualizing practices that challenge the idea that reforms are always imposed on school actors:

Standards exist in multiple ontological forms that are performed simultaneously and that, as networks themselves, are continually changing shape. Educators, like other practitioners, are quite used to juggling these shape-shifting forms and their tensions of simultaneity within the high voltage dynamic of everyday commotion. In these ways, ANT highlights the limitations of conventional accounts of standards as globally formed ideals troubled by imperfect local implementation, or as cases of domination and subjugation that require local resistance to top-down exercises of power. (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 97 – 98)

This is an area that requires further interrogation in understanding the multiplicity of ways in which professional learning policies are enacted in different contexts and what is produced through multiple enactments. This avenue of research provides a different way to understand the various forms of professional learning that emerge in schools everyday, as teachers engage in their classroom practice of teaching when they interact with objects in their environments translating policies into the reality of their professional lives. Teachers do not work as passive adopters of policy messages, but instead act as performers that contextualize policy, making it meaningful as they participate in networked associations with other actors and objects.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have offered an exploration of the ontological dimensions of professional learning in schools. Based on a study that explored teachers’ experiences of professional learning in a rural school in Canada, we have suggested that teachers enact multiple scenarios of professional learning in networked interactions with other school actors. We have suggested that professional learning is performed in multiple ways, pointing to the existence of
multiple realities of professional learning inhabiting the school settings. We identified at least two emerging scenarios of professional learning where teachers configure professional practices that enact the policies on professional learning in the school. These enactments of policies on professional development provide an example of how school actors make sense of policy abstractions through their contextualized practices. This presents a challenge to the traditional assumption that policy is a production of authoritative individuals that is transferred down the institutional hierarchy only to be “implemented” by school actors (Colebatch, Hoppe & Noordegraaf, 2011). In these instrumentalist narratives, when the implementation does not match the intentions of the policy designers, the resultant practices are casted as errors or resistance. We have shown that the notion of policy enactment (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) offers a situated and context-sensitive way to talk about the transformations and adaptations of educational policy that overcomes the limitations of the instrumentalist models in policy analysis.

We have highlighted the notion of ontological politics (Mol, 1999) and argued that the ontological dimension of professional learning intersects with its political dimension. We have shown that school actors enact multiple realities of professional learning and navigate between them configuring complex practices. The practices that emerge in these complex scenarios are part of a continuum of performances that range between the prescribed and the creative. Teachers have the capacity to shift and bridge different performances in their professional lives.

Our analysis aimed to shed light on the enactment of policies on professional development. Actor Network Theory analyses of educational policy enactments show that the complex networks of people and objects that enact educational policies are situated in specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Our aim in bringing this analysis to the professional learning field is to show that when the notion of enactment is invoked, there is a depth to the quality of professional learning that better considers the complexity within which teachers perform their daily practice of teaching and become better at doing so through the learning that occurs in these everyday engagements with the students, objects and policies that come into existence in the learning environment. More specifically, in the case of educational policies, the teachers’ context of practice influences the way educational policies are enacted and consequently, teachers’ performances of policies ought to be accounted for when trying to understand the role of policy in schools.
References


