Autonomy, teacher professionalism, and the erosion of trust in public services

Whitty and Wisby (2006) consider four forms of teacher professionalism: traditional, managerial, collaborative, and democratic, and argue that from the mid 1970s:

… the so-called ‘liberal educational establishment’ principally comprising teachers, the local authorities that employed them, and the universities that trained them, came to be regarded by governments as left-leaning and favouring what in their view were highly questionable ‘progressive’ or ‘child-centred’ approaches to teaching. Together, lack of competitive discipline and ‘progressive’ teaching methods were blamed for a leveling down of standards. The effect of these attacks was to erode trust in teachers, thereby facilitating subsequent educational reform. (p. 29)

Reduced trust, whether real or perceived, has resulted in increased government involvement in directing many public services, a concept articulated by Onora O’Neill in the BBC Reith lectures of 2002:

The diagnosis of a crisis of trust may be obscure: we are not sure whether there is a crisis of trust. But we are all agreed about the remedy. It lies in prevention and sanctions. Government, institutions and professionals should be made more accountable. And in the last two decades, the quest for greater accountability has penetrated all our lives, like great draughts of Heineken’s, reaching parts that supposedly less developed forms of accountability did not reach.

For those of us in the public sector the new accountability takes the form of detailed control. An unending stream of new legislation and regulation, memoranda and instructions, guidance and advice floods into public sector institutions….Perhaps the present revolution in accountability will make us all trustworthier. Perhaps we shall be trusted once more. But I think this is a vain hope—not necessarily because accountability is undesirable or unnecessary, but because currently fashionable methods of accountability damage rather than repair trust. If we want greater accountability without damaging professional performance, we need intelligent accountability which requires more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control.

1 http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecture1.shtml#top
The erosion of trust is a precursor to increased accountability which O’Neill so well describes. This erosion has become more pronounced internationally over the last three decades, during which time teacher autonomy has been negatively impacted as increased regulation directs and controls more of teachers’ work.

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References