Teachers’ Experiences with Bureaucracy in Loosely and Tightly Coupled Systems: Impacts on Professional Practice

by Andrew Volk

University of Manitoba

Abstract

This study explores how systems coupling impacts educational bureaucracy, which frames the professional practice of teachers, from the critical and often unexplored perspective of the teacher. The Relationships between systems coupling, bureaucracy and professional practice have implications for teachers, administrators, superintendents, researchers, and other stakeholders in educational systems. These relationships complicate the dominant conception of schools as loosely coupled systems and the emerging notion that schools would perform better as tightly coupled systems. This study finds that systems coupling can impact the various elements of an educational bureaucracy in a variety of ways and that these impacts are not uniformly positive or negative, but highly context-sensitive. The conclusion is drawn that a broad, dichotomous, uniform approach to systems coupling will not guarantee improvements to educational bureaucracies or the professional practice of teachers and that more research exploring dynamic approaches to systems coupling in educational settings is needed.

Keywords: Educational Bureaucracy, Loosely Coupled Systems, Tightly Coupled Systems, Professional Practice, Quality of Instruction, Teaching Practice
Teachers’ Experiences with Bureaucracy in Loosely and Tightly Coupled Systems: Impacts on Professional Practice

This study explores the question of how bureaucracy impacts the professional practice of teachers. Current research indicates that the main factors contributing to student achievement are teacher quality and instruction (Barber & Moursheed, 2007; Hanushek, 2009; Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009). If the quality of a teacher is the single greatest factor contributing to student success, then any knowledge of systemic factors that might have the potential to impact a teachers’ professional practice is significant.

Robert J. Marzano and Tim Waters, in *District Leadership that Works: Striking the Right Balance* (2009), have argued that one way to guarantee quality instruction in educational institutions is to structure them as tightly coupled systems, which means that there should be very high levels of uniformity and formality throughout a school system related to highly specific goals and accountability checks. This counters the traditional view of educational organizations as loosely coupled systems, which has been established in educational/systems theory literature largely by Karl E. Weick (1976; 1982), who points out that while there are vast differences from one school to another and even from one classroom to another, there are certain loosely coupled elements by which we recognize the environments as “schools” and “classrooms.”. This study considers the relationship between bureaucracy and systems coupling, and how their interactions at the systemic level impact the professional practice of teachers.

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of bureaucracy within the larger context of systems coupling on the lived experiences of teachers. This study adds to the current literature on systems coupling from the critical and often unexplored perspective of the teacher with
the hope of learning how bureaucracy might serve the function of improving teachers’ professional practice.

**Background/Conceptual Framework**

In this study, bureaucracy is discussed as the sociological construct established by Max Weber of an ideal type of organizational structure that is made up of rules and policies, authority and hierarchy structures, document management, expert training, working capacity, and work place management (Gerth & Mills, 1948). Systems coupling, which is defined at length in the works of Marzano and Waters (2009) and Weick (1976), can be conceptualized as a continuum that refers to the degree of uniformity and formality that characterizes an organization, where high degrees of uniformity, formality and specificity of goals are “tightly coupled” and lesser degrees of uniformity and formality are “loosely coupled.”

Throughout this study, the term “professional practice” refers to any element of professionalism identified by the participants or inferred by the researcher, which includes competence, efficacy, interpretation and implementation of curricula, and rapport with students and colleagues. A positive impact on professional practice is something that has in some way improved the professional practice of a teacher. Likewise, a negative impact on professional practice is something that has in some way compromised, undermined, or limited the capacity of the teacher.

**Literature Review**

The term “bureaucracy” has commonly been used pejoratively to describe inefficient, tedious, top heavy, highly formalized, and self-interested systems. The precedence for this view is largely historical as the usage of the term appeared long before it was developed as a sociological construct by Max Weber (Etzioni-Halevy: 1983). Although others have replicated the construct, argued against it, and
expanded upon its basic tenets to bridge the gap between the ideal type and the actuality of bureaucracies that function in the real world (Litwak, 1961; Hall, 1963; Fergusen, 1984; Heckscher, 1994; Adler & Borys, 1996; Olsen, 2005). Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy, which consists of rules and policies, authority and hierarchy structures, document management, expert training, working capacity, and workplace management has continued to remain at the core of almost all sociological discussions of bureaucracy.

The significance of bureaucratic factors and how they are administered remains great and has been addressed in educational literature. Studies have been conducted on teachers’ perceptions of bureaucratic and professional role orientations (Chauvin & Ellett, 1994); standardized achievement tests (Urdan & Paris, 1994); gender bias and systemic discrimination in public schooling bureaucracy (Jull, 2002); goal structures and autonomy support (Ciani, Middleton, Summers & Sheldon, 2009); administrative change and support (Easthope & Easthope, 2001; Russell, Williams & Gleason-Gomez, 2010); and the No Child Left Behind Act (Gordon, Yocke, Maldonado, & Saddler, 2007; Evans, 2010). Other studies have taken a pejorative stance on bureaucracy but have discussed its impacts on educational communities, suggesting that bureaucracy derails educational reform (Lewington & Orpwood, 1995), and that ministries of education and school boards are obsolete, leaving Canada with an educational disaster (Lawton, Freedman & Robertson, 1995). This study uses the framework of bureaucracy in a neutral manner, placing the elements in the larger context of systems coupling, and seeks to determine whether teachers’ experiences within the elements tend to be framed positively or negatively.

Systems coupling is a useful framework through which to examine bureaucracy because it provides a continuum and acts as a context within which bureaucracy is administered. Weick (1976) characterized schools as organizations in which “less rationalized and less tightly related clusters of
events” were the norm (p. 3). He used schools as primary examples of loosely coupled systems because, while there are many points of high variability and vastly different administrative styles among educational institutions, they exhibit a remarkable constancy over time and in different contexts. In his own words Weick (1976) explains that “despite variations in class size, format, locations, and architecture, the results are still recognizable and can be labelled ‘schools’” (p. 2). Weick (1982) goes on to assert that, “Schools are not like other organizations; consequently, they need to be managed differently. Much of their uniqueness derives from the fact that they are joined more loosely than is true for other organizations” (p. 673). It is important to note that Weick is not criticizing schools for embodying these qualities; he is simply pointing out that these are some of the realities that make schools different from other organizations. Weick (1982) even lists the strengths associated with loosely coupled systems including that “[they] preserve novelty, ...[they] can adapt to small changes in an environment... and they allow the school to adapt quickly to conflicting demands” (p. 674).

Weick’s (1982) prediction, that the elements of a loosely coupled system would be misrepresented as “evidence of fallible management, indecisiveness and the need for administrators to run a tighter ship” (p. 674), has come to pass. For example, Marzano and Waters (2009) argue that schools should operate as tightly coupled systems in order to be more effective at preventing failure. They suggest that student achievement is directly related to quality of instruction in the classroom, and that “any perturbations in student achievement should signal a need to shore up instruction in classrooms... [and that success is a product of] non-negotiable goals, decreased pedagogical variability and a systematic and systemwide approach to instruction” (p. 20-21).

At the time of this study, to the best knowledge of the researcher, there had been no studies exploring teachers’ experiences with all of the six elements of bureaucracy as defined by Weber, nor had there been any studies that analyzed the effects of these elements on professional practice within the
context of systems coupling. This paper outlines the findings of interviews with three teachers who were asked to consider how the six elements of bureaucracy impacted their professional practice, positively or negatively. The findings were then analyzed through the lens of systems coupling to determine the extent to which tightly coupled or loosely coupled system elements were evidenced in the lived experiences of teachers and what teachers would therefore perceive to be preferable for improving their professional practice.

**Methods**

Due to the personal and anecdotal nature of the data that was collected for this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the lived experiences of teachers with the six elements of bureaucracy. The three participants consisted of two males and one female from urban schools. Two of the participants were classroom teachers in high schools and the other was a student services teacher who worked in both early and middle years settings. All of the teachers who participated in this study had between ten and thirty years of professional experience.

This study took place over the course of three months in late 2010/early 2011 and was conducted as part of a Qualitative Research Methods Course at a large Western Canadian University. The interview consisted of six questions, each of which was based on one of the six elements of bureaucracy identified by Weber. The questions were designed to be as neutral as possible, asking participants to share memorable work experiences related to each aspect of bureaucracy. Participants were also asked to provide information about the work environments in which the events occurred and asked to reflect on how the events impacted their professional practice in positive and/or negative ways. Throughout each interview, questions and requests for clarification were added based on the feedback of the participants.
The interviews ranged from forty to sixty minutes and were recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed, and returned to the participants for a member check. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and any identifiers were removed, including any names, names of schools or school divisions, or reference to specific teaching assignments. The data was then coded using the frameworks of Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy and systems coupling within and across the interviews using a constant comparative analysis.

The researcher is a graduate student at a Canadian University and a full time middle-years teacher employed in the school division in which the research was conducted. Possible limitations of this study include researcher bias, the small sample size, and high reliability on established theoretical frameworks. As a teacher in the same province, city, and school division as the participants, it is possible that the researcher’s interpretation of the data was impacted by his own experience with the issues that emerged in the interviews. The scope of this study was small, including only three participants and taking place over the course of three months. This study relies heavily on theoretical frameworks related to bureaucracy and systems coupling. No attempt was made to organize or analyse the data outside of the context of these frameworks.

Findings

It was not assumed that teachers had any knowledge of Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy, but the structure of the interview predetermined that the participants would speak about each of the six aspects of bureaucracy that comprised the framework. It was also not assumed that teachers had any knowledge of systems coupling. All references to systems coupling were coded by the researcher based on the data provided by the participants about their work environments. Throughout the interviews teachers discussed the perceived impacts of bureaucracy on their professional practices. Often, the participants described either positive or negative impacts on professional practice. In some cases, the
participants described positive or negative impacts, but did not actually connect them to any of the elements of bureaucracy being explored; at other times they shared an experience, but could not provide specific examples or details of how their professional practice was impacted. This resulted in a number of neutral impacts on professional practice. In other cases teachers described impacts on professional practice that were simultaneously negative in one way and positive in another or that changed over time, which resulted in mixed impacts on professional practice.

**Rules and Policies**

When teachers were asked to share their experiences with rules and policies they reported predominantly negative impacts on professional practice. Comparatively small numbers of positive, neutral and mixed impacts were also reported.

The specific rules and policies that were associated with negative impacts included rules about taking attendance, assessment policies, and a de facto rule that restricted the topics a teacher was allowed to discuss with students. The negative impacts that the participants reported included reduced interactions with students, distractions, compromised integrity, contradictions to curriculum documents, reduced capacity to provide feedback to students, and increased workload, each of which was mentioned once across the interviews. Changed routines, time-management, less autonomy, and less authority were each mentioned twice. In all of these cases teachers described tightly coupled systems in which the rules or policies were highly centralized and systemic in nature. The most overt example of tight coupling was a provincial assessment policy that restricted teachers from including considerations such as lateness, incomplete work, and plagiarism when assigning marks, which was overturned a relatively short time after its introduction. The policy was, in the words of one participant, “funnelled down to our school practices and we were assigned these changes and expected to implement them in our classrooms.” Another participant expressed the ambivalence he felt regarding
the top-down delivery of the new policy, stating “you’re told to do it [assessment] a different way, and you’re wondering is this an educational system, or is this a political system, or is this a bureaucratic system – or decision – what, what is the basis for this decision? Who was consulted? How does this impact on my teaching?”

Experiences that teachers associated with positive impacts on professional practice included a situation in which staff worked together in a problem solving capacity in order to implement the new assessment policy described above, where the positive impacts included teacher collaboration, shared goals and the reworking of curricula. In another case a teacher made reference to his experience implementing his own rules at the classroom level that contradicted certain school policies, in which the positive impact was the emergence of teachable moments and the opportunity to reinforce certain patterns of behaviour. The second experience took place in a loosely coupled system where the teacher was allowed to digress from school rules within the confines of his classroom relatively unchallenged by colleagues or authority figures.

Neutral impacts on professional practice were the need to adapt, which was mentioned by two participants and routinization, a function of bureaucracy, which was mentioned once. These impacts were associated with a tightly coupled system and were described as processes that occurred naturally alongside changes in attendance and assessment practices.

Certain impacts on professional practice that have already been mentioned could also be classified as mixed impacts on professional practice. For example, one participant who spoke about a change in the attendance routine indicated that it was a temporary negative impact that limited interactions with students and caused distractions, but he later indicated that it became a routinized task that no longer had a significant impact. Another participant spoke about the assessment policy that
had negatively impacted teachers, but also shared that teachers were working collaboratively to address the issue according to the best interests of the students.

**Authority and Hierarchy Structures**

When sharing experiences that related to authority and hierarchy structures, participants reported positive and negative impacts on professional practice. In the combined data there were more positive impacts on professional practice reported than negative ones. Most of the experiences that were reported to have had positive impacts on professional practice were described to have taken place in tightly coupled environments, while most of the negative impacts on practice occurred within loosely coupled contexts.

Some of the experiences that participants associated with positive impacts on professional practice included the implementation of a new attendance system, a specialist reporting directly to a Superintendent without first having to confirm with principals, a unique program for which administration gave special permissions to a teacher, and the opportunity to work as part of team on the development of a curriculum document. Participants reported that their professional practice benefitted from instant access to information, more creativity in program design, more authority, more autonomy, more social capital, increased access to students, unconventional teaching resources, more relevant programming, feeling valued, the opportunity to share expertise, a sense of pride, teamwork, an increased sense of efficacy, a broadened perspective on curriculum, a deeper knowledge of curriculum, and improved quality of reflection.

Some of the experiences that participants associated with negative impacts on professional practice were the trend towards more centralized decision making, sudden cancellation of a school’s professional development event by a Superintendent, course content being dictated by an administrator, and a complex chain of command in which certain roles were loosely framed and power
struggles between colleagues emerged. Participants reported negative impacts that included increased workload, damage to staff morale, antagonistic feelings, a ‘work to rule’ atmosphere, resistance to authority, inability to teach outcomes of a course, circumvention of proper channels of authority, arbitrary assignment of course designations, misplaced authority, compromised professional relationships and issues related to the division of labour. Several of these issues were present in one example that involved teachers’ course designations. The participant described a loosely coupled system in which a “team leader” (a semi-official position decided at the school level) decided the course designations of colleagues. The participant described how “a team leader is put in a position of authority that, perhaps, is not necessarily framed well enough for them to do a good job. And I and other teachers have been at the mercy of that.”

**Document Management**

When sharing experiences that related to document management, participants reported experiences that resulted in positive, negative and mixed impacts on professional practice. In the combined data participants reported roughly the same number of positive and negative impacts as well as several mixed impacts. In the case of document management there seemed to be no clear patterns between impacts on professional practice and systems coupling, although the majority of examples were in some way reminiscent of tightly coupled systems.

Experiences that were associated with positive impacts on professional practice included general day to day document management, funding of programs based on reports, use of curricula, and the use of technology in the forms of assessment software and email. Participants reported positive impacts such as the creation of paper trails and historical records, the creation of programs and teaching positions, guided practice, enhanced planning, improved self-monitoring, measurement tools, enhanced understanding of job description, accountability, more accurate and meaningful assessment, improved
record keeping skills, increased student engagement and more access to students. Better organization, an increased sense of efficacy and more efficient communication were each mentioned twice across the three interviews.

Experiences associated with negative impacts on professional practice included the implementation of a centralized report card document, standardized curricula, restrictions to internet access and general day to day document management. Participants reported negative impacts such as generic student assessments, depersonalization, loss of voice, ‘dumbing down’ of assessment, erosion of professionalism, unaccounted for contextual differences between subjects, limited access to resources, increased workload, higher volumes of communication, increasing rate of change, and distractions from planning and assessment. The erosion of autonomy was mentioned as a negative impact in two different examples by one participant and issues related to time management were discussed by all participants in at least one example.

Experiences associated with mixed impacts on professional practice included the general centralization and standardization of documents and the use of curriculum documents. Participants reported impacts such as consistency, fewer decisions and less responsibility for teachers, micromanagement and workload. Consistency was described as beneficial from a systems perspective, but it was argued that it came at too great a price to teachers and students. Fewer decisions and less responsibility for teachers were characterized by one participant as an erosion of professionalism, while another participant considered it a benefit. Workload was reported by one participant to have increased and by another to have decreased in experiences pertaining to document management.

Training

When sharing experiences related to training, participants reported a total of six positive impacts and three mixed impacts on professional practice. No experiences related to training were
described as having negative impacts on professional practice, but some examples were neutral, or described as having no impact on professional practice. One of the participants offered no experiences related to training.

Experiences associated with positive impacts on practice included practicum experience, professional development opportunities and training in general. Participants reported positive impacts on practice that included the provision of basic skills and tools, development of expert knowledge, new teaching strategies, adaptive expertise, a broadened perspective, and the development of lifelong learning.

Experiences associated with neutral impacts on professional practice included University training and mandatory professional development programs which were reported by one participant to have had no significant impact on efficacy. Another participant described mandatory professional development programs as having mixed impacts on professional practice in that their focus is too general and their usefulness depends on the teacher’s level of experience.

In these examples there were no overt descriptions of working environments in terms of loose and tight coupling; however, participants distinguished between “mandatory” professional development sessions that are largely attended and specialized optional sessions, which might be thought of as more tightly and loosely coupled respectively.

Working Capacity

When sharing experiences related to working capacity, participants reported positive impacts on professional practice in the majority of cases. In a small number of examples there were reports of negative or neutral impacts, and one participant made reference to a situation that had resulted in a mix of positive and negative impacts on professional practice throughout her experience. When teachers
discussed their experiences with respect to working capacity, there seemed to be strong relationships between positive impacts on professional practice and loose coupling and negative impacts and tight coupling.

Experiences associated with positive impacts on professional practice included the administration of an exchange program, teaching an adult education course, involvement in extra-curricular activities and flexible scheduling. Participants reported that their professional practice benefited from opportunities for deeper self reflection, a sense of ownership of teaching, enhanced knowledge of content areas, recognition of student motivation factors, community development, improved student performance, the planning of better activities, a greater variety of activities, and the opportunity to work outside of a classroom setting. Increased contact with parents was mentioned twice by different participants. In most of these cases, teachers described extra-curricular activities in which they participated voluntarily, and in some cases they designed and implemented themselves, making these clear examples of loose coupling

Experiences associated with negative impacts on professional practice referenced general workload. In these examples participants described struggling with issues of time management and being distracted from planning and assessment practices by non-teaching tasks. Experiences with extra-curricular activities and general workload management were at times discussed only in terms of how they impacted personal and family life, and seemed to have a neutral impact on professional practice. One participant discussed coaching a school team in terms of how it affected time spent with students outside of the classroom, student-teacher relationships, the learning environment and student comfort levels, all of which could be positive or negative depending on the particular situation and the individuals and interactions involved.
Workplace Management

When sharing experiences related to workplace management, participants reported negative and mixed impacts on professional practice almost exclusively. There were almost forty references to negative and mixed impacts on professional practice combined and only a few references to positive impacts on professional practice made by one participant. The majority of experiences shared made reference to tight coupling, but it is important to note that some of the negative experiences were contextualized by loose coupling and all of the positive experiences were contextualized by tight coupling.

Experiences associated with negative impacts on professional practice included changing and inconsistent policies, increasing centralization, and working conditions in a locally managed residential school. Participants reported negative impacts that included confusion, fatigue, fear, erosion of leadership, ineffectual practices, lower morale, political game-playing, ethnocentrism and monoculturalism, conflicting values, and cultural dissonance. Some negative impacts were mentioned more than once including the erosion of autonomy, duplicity, depersonalization and the erosion of professionalism. One work environment was described as being extremely loosely coupled, while tight coupling was described in the rest of the examples. The assessment policy discussed above was referenced again, and one participant described the general trend towards centralization and specifically referenced the change in the tone of staff meetings, saying that they used to be democratic forums, but that “now staff meetings are... all of the information that all of the principals got when they went to the principals meeting, and that’s all the information that the school divisions got when they went to the metro-superintendents meeting, and that’s all that the metro-superintendents got when they met with the Deputy Minister of Education, and everything flows downhill.”
Experiences associated with mixed impacts on professional practice included making adaptations to comply with new assessment policies and working in student services in four schools at once. The participants who spoke to the implementation of a new assessment policy reported impacts on professional practice that included assigning more work, using selective marking practices, adapting instruction and assessment strategies, implementation of policies that did not impact efficacy, lack of clarity, and conflict between institutional authority and teacher autonomy. Some of these impacts on professional practice have only been classified as mixed because the participants indicated that they did what they felt was best for students in their implementation of the policy, while the undertone was that the work that had to be done to implement the policy was superficial and an inefficient use of time. The participant who worked in student services in four schools reported difficulty defining the role, greater capacity for adaptability, more autonomy, fragmented communication, an ability to address highly individualized student needs, workload, and discontinuity. While some of these impacts sound positive and others negative, they were classified as mixed due to the fact that they were interrelated and occurred simultaneously as elements of the same experience.

One participant associated the experience of working in a metro school division with positive impacts on practice such as regular meetings with colleagues, regular evaluations by administrators, more structure, and a better understanding of protocol.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate not only that bureaucracy impacts the professional practice of teachers, but that there is a relationship between the systems coupling that contextualizes the bureaucracy and the positive or negative nature of the impact, which complicates both the historically dominant view of schools as inherently loosely coupled and the emerging notion that tightly coupled systems will produce higher quality instruction. By assuming that schools are purely loosely coupled
institutions, authentic opportunities for improvement may be missed, but placing too much emphasis on tight coupling may compromise other aspects of quality teaching and professionalism.

This study would suggest that in relation to rules and policies, training, and workplace management, tightly coupled systems seem to produce predominantly negative impacts on professional practice. Authority and hierarchy on the other hand, were frequently referenced as having positive impacts on professional practice in tightly coupled systems. Working capacity was described as having many positive impacts and typically characterized as loosely coupled, but reported to have negative aspects when discussed in the context of tight coupling. Experiences that didn’t fit these patterns were also reported as having mixed or neutral impacts on professional practice, which illustrates the need to move beyond the dichotomous thinking that one style of systems coupling is better than the other. In reality teachers reported nuanced experiences, the impacts of which were multi-dimensional and often changed over time.

In the case of rules and policies there seemed to be a positive relationship between tightly coupled systems and negative impacts on professional practices. It is noteworthy that two of the three participants made reference to the same assessment policy and that all three participants made reference to policies and de facto rules that were restrictive to teachers. It might be inferred that restrictive rules and policies have negative impacts on professional practice whether they are implemented in loosely or tightly coupled systems; However, it could also be argued that teachers have some degree of difficulty assessing the impacts of rules and policies because they rely heavily on their subjective experiences of them and may not be aware of broad or long-term systemic impacts.

In the case of authority and hierarchy structures there seemed to be correlations between positive impacts and tightly coupled systems and negative impacts and loosely coupled systems. Upon reflection, one might expect this to be the case as administrative structures in tightly coupled systems
are generally more uniform, stable, organized and efficient with relation to highly specific goals.

Teachers might be more likely to report negative experiences in loosely coupled systems where administrative structures appear to be less stable, disorganized or inefficient, or where goals are less clear. As one participant shared, complex and convoluted hierarchies can result in poorly framed positions of authority and politically charged situations that significantly impact professional practice.

With regards to document management, there was little to suggest a pattern in the relationships between systems coupling and professional practice. The number of positive and negative impacts reported was fairly even and both were reported to have taken place in loosely and tightly coupled systems. A notable factor is that the vast majority of examples were contextualized by tight coupling. This is likely because most document management tasks are institutionalized forms of communication, record keeping, or accountability measures. Speaking of document management one participant said “It’s definitely necessary... but no one says ‘Oh, thank god there’s report cards’, ” a statement that succinctly captures the general neutrality with which the subject is viewed.

In the case of training, the most noteworthy observation is that there were no reports of negative impacts on professional practice. At worst, experiences related to training were described as having no impact on practice. Generally, training was described as worthwhile and beneficial. The main distinguishing factor that was referenced was the degree of choice or autonomy that teachers felt in relation to professional development. Participants expressed that mandatory, large-scale professional development was either not useful or only useful for inexperienced teachers. Participants expressed that meaningful professional development was characterized by choice, specialized expertise and practicality.

With regards to working capacity, this study found that there were relationships between loose coupling and positive impacts on professional practice and tight coupling and negative impacts on
professional practice. The data indicated that the working capacity of teachers was demanded in two basic scenarios; the first being on a voluntary basis and the second being on a mandatory basis. When participants were asked to discuss the issue of working capacity in terms of situations that required them to go beyond their obligatory duties, all made reference to extra-curricular programs in which they chose to participate or administrate. The voluntary aspect of these activities likely predisposes teachers to have positive associations with them. More noteworthy is the fact that in many instances these programs are loosely coupled in that there are very few official mandates or documents that dictate program design or outcomes. On the other hand, when participants referenced situations in which they had to spend extra time on mandatory and obligatory tasks, it was more common to associate them with negative impacts on professional practice as well as personal and family life.

In the case of workplace management there was, to a certain degree, a positive relationship between tightly coupled systems and negative impacts on professional practice. Once again, it is noteworthy that two participants made reference to the same change in assessment policies, which were seen as highly centralized decisions that had major impacts on workload and classroom management but were seen as superficial in terms of impacts on teacher efficacy and student achievement. Had there not been such a specific and negative systemic example at hand, the participants might not have listed as many negative impacts or focussed so exclusively on tight coupling. Likewise, it is important to observe that the other participant made reference to a few positive impacts on practice that were all contextualized by tight coupling. The relationship might be attributable to the fact that, like rules and policies, workplace management is an area in which teachers are more likely to experience restrictions and limitations. Where there is a trend towards increasing centralization or tight coupling, as indicated by participants in this study, there is also likely to be less freedom and autonomy. One participant in this study made several references throughout the interview to the erosion of autonomy and professionalism that he sees as the collateral damage to increasing centralization. From
this participant’s perspective the argument can be made that teachers who have experienced a loss of autonomy and professionalism may act duplicitously and politically, which will not provide a better context for teacher professionalism and practice.

**Conclusion**

This study confirms that the six elements of Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy can have a profound impact on the professional practice of teachers. The data that were collected through teachers’ anecdotal reports provide a base upon which to infer the existence of relationships between systems coupling and teachers’ perceptions of their professional practices. These relationships are made evident using the elements of bureaucracy as a lens through which to analyze professional experiences.

The existence of these relationships could have implications for teachers, administrators, superintendents, researchers, and other stakeholders in educational systems. The findings complicate the dominant conception of schools as loosely coupled systems and the emerging notion that schools would perform better as tightly coupled systems. Such dichotomous thinking does not reflect the experiences of teachers in this study, nor does it allow for contextual factors or situations whereby different elements of bureaucracy might be supported by both tightly coupled or loosely coupled organizational structures.

In the context of this study, certain claims regarding the application of systems coupling to educational bureaucracies can be made. Rules and policies, especially those that are highly restrictive, expert (specialized) training, demands on working capacity, and workplace management can have negative impacts in a tightly coupled system because these areas are closely related to issues of autonomy and professionalism and apply to dynamic real-life situations that require individuals to change and adapt. Authority/hierarchy structures and document management, on the other hand, can
have positive impacts on professional practice in tightly coupled systems because they provide an environment of uniformity, structure, stability, and reliability that can support autonomy and professionalism. The impact of systems coupling on professional practice is nuanced and dilemmas will inevitably arise when a dichotomized form of systems coupling is applied to an environment as dynamic as a school system; However, a balanced and intentional application of systems coupling could have positive impacts on the professional practice of teacher, increasing the capacity within an organization for quality instruction and student achievement.
References


