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## Teacher Professionalism.

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## **TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM**

### **Christopher K. Shon**

#### **I. Is Teaching a Profession?**

Men are social beings. In a society, men are interdependent each other through various types of jobs. Some produce crops, some manufacture tools, some transport products, and some teach how to do all these things. Though all the jobs are valuable for the survival of a community, not all the jobs have same values. Because of the inequality in the perceived significance among the jobs, there is stratification in training for the job, remuneration, and social prestige of the workers. Some types of jobs are mastered on the site within a few weeks of training but others are required a few years of training even after college education. Some workers are paid by the salaries but others are charging fees to the clients. Some employees are forming unions for the protection of their rights but others are forging association for professional advancement.

Is teaching a profession? It is one of the controversial questions in the modern society of America. Most teachers in public and private schools are college graduates with years training in teaching. However, many people are thinking that if "everybody boil water and coach basketball, then they kind of feel the same way about teaching" (Wallis, 1994, p. 63). The emergence of home schooling and charter schools is partly based on the perception of the teaching as a "non-profession." Even though we admit the need of professional preparation of the teacher, many people think that the profession of teaching is fundamentally different from those that receive the greatest public recognition. "Teachers are not professionals in the conventional sense of the term" (Prate & Rury, 1991). Though there was another effort to define teaching as a "new professionalism"

(Bicentennial Commission on Education for the Profession of Teaching, 1976), there are still other reasons that teaching is not a profession in a traditional sense.

### **1. Teaching, a Craft Profession**

The perception of teaching as a semi- or quasi-profession is apparent, especially, when it is compared to the traditional professions, such as the jobs of medical doctors or lawyers. Though teachers are different from the simple laborers, from training to the characteristics of the duties, they belong to a distinctive group of professions, quite different from the more elite expert professions commonly identified with professional status. Pratte and Rury (1991) defined teaching as "a craft profession, built on a conscience of craft, rather than a more conventional ideal of professionalism." Ayers (1990) defined teachers as "economically marginal but symbolically significant workers."

#### 1) Lack of Specialized Knowledge

Pratte and Rury argued that, whereas the expert professionals are required to have "conceptualized" or formal knowledge to perform their duties on the jobs, the teachers need only "embodied" or experiential knowledge to perform their jobs. Conceptualized knowledge is the knowledge acquired through formal training as a standard procedure to perform the jobs in the field; while embodied knowledge is "something that they learn by doing and that is experientially learned, rather than acquired in a systematic, highly formal fashion" (Prate & Rury, 1991, p. 62).

Schon (1983) called it the knowledge acquired through "reflection in action" and Polanyi (1967) defined it as "tacit knowledge"

#### 2) Highly Indeterminate Quality of Teacher's Work

Indetermination/Technicality Ratio (I/T) is "the possibility of transmitting the mastery of intellectual or material instruments to achieve a given results" (Pratte & Rury, 1991) at the job site. When compared to the traditional professionals, such as medical doctors and lawyers, the teachers have high numerical value in I/T. In other words, the possibility of gaining informal knowledge on the job, rather than from the professional training program at college, is higher than the other types of jobs.

## 2. Characteristics of Teaching

The impressions of professionalism perceived by the general public are also served as the criteria that distinguish teaching from the other professions. First of all, teachers are relatively paid less than the other professionals (See Table 1). In addition, teachers have fewer chances to increase their income through career ladders or performance-based bonus systems. An employee-management relationship at schools is not different from that of the other occupations. Teachers are not recognized from the public as the professionals with prestige. Thus, to the general public in the United States, teaching is at most seen "an art embodying particular skills with a certain degree of linguistic and logical skill" (Pratte & Rury, 1991).

Table 1: Average Monthly Earnings for Adults with a Bachelor's Degree  
(Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

Major	Earnings
Engineering	\$3,189
Economics	\$2,923
Mathematics/statistics	\$2,716
Business/management	\$2,626
Law Enforcement	\$2,331
Nursing/pharmacy/technical health	\$2,080
English/journalism	\$2,032
Biology	\$1,990
Psychology	\$1,974

Social science	\$1,922
Liberal arts/humanities	\$1,733
<i>Education</i>	<i>\$1,699</i>
<b>All majors</b>	<b>\$2,269</b>

Burbules and Densmore (1991b) and Sykes (1989) summarized the characteristics of teaching in the U.S. as follows:

1. Teaching is largely feminized.
2. Teachers come from generally middle-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds and have relatively modest occupational goals.
3. Teaching is a heavily unionized occupation.
4. Teaching is a public monopoly featuring conscripted clients.
5. Teaching is a mass provision of educational services.
6. Sheer ubiquity of teaching in the society: 'Everybody teaches.'

Though these observations might emphasize the superficial aspects of teaching, they are eventually related to the fundamental differences between teaching and other traditional professions.

### **3. Profession and Professionalism**

Pratte and Rury (1991) defined professionalism as "an ideal to which individuals and occupational groups aspire, in order to distinguish themselves from other workers."

The prestigious status that the expert professionals enjoy is based on the following characteristics of a profession: 1) a distinctive body of knowledge, 2) the membership control, and 3) the commitment to the welfare of the client.

#### 1) Expert Knowledge

Professionals are expected to have expertise to do their work. The status of a profession has in part been a reflection of its identification with a distinctive body of knowledge. Because of this expertise in knowledge, organizations that employ professionals are not typically based on the authority of supervisors, but rather on

collegial relationships among peers (Ambrosie & Harley, 1988). Knowledge is the basis for decisions that are made with respect to the unique needs of clients. The professional autonomy and authoritative power of the professionals over their practices are also derived from this expertise of the professionals.

## 2) Professional Autonomy

The expert professionals assume collective responsibility for the definition, transmittal, and enforcement of professional standards of practice. They also control the education and licensing process of its members. The selection process starts from the admission process into the educational agencies, typically university programs at graduate level. Because of the competition to the limited number of students admitted to the program, the better prepared candidates are selected. In completion of the program, the candidates of the professionals have to pass the rigorous test on the expert knowledge, followed by continuous evaluation during the internship period. This certification process not only controls the induction of members to a profession, but also promotes the acquisition of standardized, formal knowledge required to its members through their interaction with the experts in the profession.

## 3) Motivation on Public Services

In addition to the requirement of expert knowledge in theory and practice, the professional practitioners pledge their first concern to the welfare of the clients. Codes of ethics in the professional practices are usually established by the professional association and enforced by the peers in the profession. If any client is not satisfied with the services provided by a professional, he or she initiates a legal process instead of reporting the case to the supervisor.

As discussed so far, teachers are substantially different from the expert professionals in professional training, induction process into the field, professional autonomy, practitioner-client relationship, and social status. These differences not only characterize the nature of teaching but also determine the nature of education that the American students receive at schools. As teacher professionalism has been a major concern among the proponents of American education reform since early 1980s, more attention on the status of American teachers seems to be needed.

## **II. TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM**

### **1. Calls for Education Reform**

After *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) ascribed the economic downfall of the country to the mediocrity of schooling and teacher incompetence, there have been calls for “accountable” schools through educational reform. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy, 1986) adamantly proposed changes in teacher preparation, the organization and roles of school personnel, teacher salary structure, and certification of new teachers through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The Holmes Group, one of the forerunners in the advocacy of educational reform, also recommended “professional teachers” with expertise, autonomy, and commitment for students’ learning (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988). In acknowledging the need to restructure teaching, they all seem to agree that “attaining professional status for teachers is an essential part of the reform effort” (p. 83). Teacher professionalism became “a theme in search of specific

policy initiatives and a social meaning appropriate to teaching circumstances” (Burbules & Densmore, 1991, p. 54).

## **2. Strategies for Teacher Professionalization**

Sykes (1989) is one of the proponents for teacher professionalism. By adopting the development of professionalism in medicine and law, he proposed the establishment of developmental schools for teachers. According to Sykes, a four-part standard is securely enshrined in medicine:

1. a set of preprofessional courses taken within the undergraduate curriculum, together with a difficult entry examination to medical school;
2. graduation from an accredited medical school;
3. completion of a rigorous professional examination; and,
4. completion of an accredited residency (p. 256).

Sykes, thus, argues that the quality of the individual practitioners in teaching should be promoted through raising the standards of the teachers. This call for standards might be feasible through the selective admission to the accredited teacher education programs and formal induction into a professional development school of the candidates. This school for beginning teachers is “the community of practice and the company of fellows that constitute the reference group for professional behavior” (p. 262).

In addition to the professional preparation of teachers at the accredited teacher preparation program and at the professional development school, which functions as an induction center of the professional teachers and a knowledge-producing center in teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1989), the followings were also recommended by various proponents for teacher professionalization:

1. setting the national or state standards for professional teachers (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Schrof, 1996);



2. teacher empowerment at school decision making: “shared governance” of schools (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988); and
3. higher teacher compensation and establishment of career ladder in teaching.

While increased teacher commitment, enriched curriculum and instructional practice, and higher student achievement have been projected as outcomes of teacher professionalization (Firestone, 1993), there are also some controversies over teacher professionalism.

### **3. Some Concerns against Teacher Professionalization**

Though the call for teacher professionalization by Sykes and others were for the quality of professional practitioners in the field, there have been quite adamant oppositions against these proposals. Burbules and Densmore (1991) objected the idea by saying that calls to establish a profession of teaching make the following fundamental errors:

1. More extensive educational requirements will result in the further underrepresentation of minority teachers.
2. The actual objective of teacher professionalization is “professionalism for the few.” When considering the current level of budget to the education, only 20% of the teaching force could become fully “professional.”
3. The pursuit of professionalism involves forms of self-interested political action that are incompatible with the democratic aims espoused by educators.
4. Too little attention has been given to the question of whether teachers can benefit from some features of professionalism without subjecting themselves to others, more constraining sorts of demands as well (such as working even more hours without pay).

In other words, teacher professionalization would have consequences that undermine the ends of democracy, equity, and cultural diversity. It also implies a problem of teacher isolation, i.e. alienation between the practitioners (teachers) and their clients (students), or a tyranny of the experts in the market of educational services.

Professionalization of teachers seems to be an ideology that encompasses the conflicting expectations which our society demands of teachers. Although the opponents of teacher professionalism agree that improving teachers' salaries, status, and work conditions is essential, they argue that the traditional professional model is an ineffective, inappropriate basis for accomplishing these goals.

#### **4. Issues**

While the proponents of the teacher professionalism have concerned about the quality of American education, the opponents of the idea focused on the principle of equity in a democratic society. Calls for teacher professionalism seem to entail at least the following three issues: (1) Standards in the profession, (2) quality education for many, and (3) professional accountability.

##### 1) Standards in the Profession

Historically, the education of the children was the responsibility of parents or, at least, local and state governments, not that of federal government. Without any national regulation on education, there was no standard in educating the children. Even after the passage of mandatory school attendance laws by many state governments, the educational standards are different by districts. Because of the limited power on education by the federal government, it has been hard for the U.S. to set up any national standard in education, either. However, without the national norms for education, it's hard to set national standards for teachers and to measure whether the schools met the educational needs of the children.

##### 2) Quality vs. Quantity

Since public education is providing educational services to a large body of clients, there have always been shortages of qualified teachers. The educational authorities usually followed some easy expedients to meet such a demand, such as resorting to emergency credentials other than accredited university teacher education programs, increasing class size, or hiring unqualified teachers. These practices were often justified in lieu of high teacher turn-over rate and recent influx of immigrants, especially in urban areas of the United States.

The history of education in the U.S. may be characterized as an effort to accomplish two goals: provide equal educational opportunity and attain excellence in student achievement (Parker & Parker, 1995). While the professionalization of teachers is a method to seek a quality education, the provision of quality educational services to the all levels of students should be pursued, too.

### 3) Bureaucratic vs. Professional Accountability

With a top-down imposition of change in education, bureaucratic accountability can be asked to the superintendent or the principals of the schools. However, teacher professionalization will ultimately entail some questions of efficient management of schools and a possible tyranny of the experts, i.e., professional teachers (Firestone & Bader, 1991). Even after the professionalization of teachers, the nature of public education might be fundamentally different from medicine or law. The outcomes of successful schooling cannot be measured within a short period of time and professional accountability to each teacher might be difficult due to the number of teachers involved and variety of other factors in education.

### III. IMPLICATIONS

Education should be understood in the social, historical, and political context and making teaching a profession is only possible by a confluence of social, political, and economic circumstances. Whether we like the idea teacher professionalization or not, there are at least five basic requirements for its realization: (1) creating standards for teachers, (2) professional training of new teachers through an accredited teacher education program and a professional development school, (3) creating advanced positions in teaching career, (4) increased salary of the teachers, and (5) acknowledging the unique nature of teaching. On the assumption that teacher professionalism is one of the primary requirements for American educational reform, we need to consider its impact on the organization of schools, teachers, teacher education programs, and community.

#### 1. Teacher Empowerment

Almost all the advocates of the education reform agree that the conditions under which teachers work are suffused with bureaucracy. Most problems in these school environments are associated with centralized state control and bureaucratic school structures (Burbules & Densmore, 1991b). Thus, a paradigm shift in school management is needed as a prerequisite of teacher professionalism. "Schools should abolish the factory model of education management which treats teachers as workers and which assumes that students are passive uniform cogs in a production process" (AFT, 1986, quoted in Ambrosie & Haley, 1988). Then, a drastic change in the traditional authority structure in the relationship between the school administrator and teachers is needed.

Does increased teacher power promote improved education? According to Ambrosie and Haley (1988), teacher participation in decision making and school management improved teacher satisfaction, but not so strong correlation was found between participation in decision making and organizational effectiveness. However, Ambrosie and Haley (both are school administrators) predicted that the teacher empowerment issue will receive major attention at the national, state, and local levels of government for a better quality of a school and shared responsibility in its accomplishments.

## **2. Teacher Effectiveness**

Control of the work place and recognition of the accumulated embodied knowledge of teachers is what teachers should strive for, not some vague and illusory status associated with the expert professions (Pratte & Rury, 1991). However, a recent study shows that sixty percent of the nation's current secondary school mathematics teachers did not major in and are not certified to teach mathematics (Wise, 1991). To gain professionals with the expertise to do their work, the candidates should be well prepared during their pre-service programs and the standards for entry into the teaching should be required by the school system (Ambrosie & Haley, 1991).

## **3. Teacher Education Programs**

According to the view of teaching as a 'craft-professional' (Pratte & Rury, 1991), the goal of teacher education is to produce not an autonomous professional but an employee who is a skilled practitioner, with a conscience of craft, confident, committed,

and secure in her or his identity as a teacher. In this model, teacher education ought to be based primarily in schools, where prospective teachers can learn directly from experienced practitioners and master the knowledge-in-action.

Programs which prepare teachers have remained essentially the same for the past fifty years in spite of numerous reform and innovation efforts (Portman, 1993). However, the concept of teacher professionalism requires educational preparation programs for teachers with (1) considerable leadership and sound judgment, (2) wisdom to do good for those they teach, (3) vision that transcends reactivity, and (4) a clear sense of fundamental purposes in schooling (Delattre, 1993). To meet these goals, the teacher education programs should be accredited by the national association (such as NCATE). Then, the candidates should pass through the internship program in such professional schools as suggested by Sykes (1991).

Professionally accountable teachers can be prepared through adequate preparation for the most responsible course of action for the clients. However, there are two concerns with professional training of teachers. First, because of the unique relationship of teacher education with liberal arts education, do we need graduate programs of teacher education or not? If so, what are the undergraduate prerequisites and curriculum components of the graduate program? Secondly, is there any market for the professional teachers? Strong resistance from the teachers unions (Toch, 1996), lack of educational budget at local governments, and the sheer numbers of students might be some of the factors that interfere with a smooth adoption of professional teachers in the American school system.

#### **4. Other Considerations**

##### 1) Academic Achievement

All the members of a community need to have a sense of crisis in schooling. Our students are not measuring up to international standards (Wise, 1991). When the education has a positive correlation with the national economy, the academic achievement of students at schools might be a key predictor of the survival of the U.S. in the international competition. The basic knowledge for vocational and academic success at post-secondary level should be laid down from the elementary education. It might be a high time for establishing national public school goals (Parker & Parker, 1995).

## 2) Parental Commitment

Are the children in America ready to learn at schools? In other words, is school solely responsible for the academic achievement of the students? Parental involvement in school, preparing children to succeed at school work, and respect of the professional work of the teachers are all dependent on the support of the parents at home. Some charter schools in California tried a “Parental Contract” with the parents and it worked really well (*Time*, Oct. 31, 1994). Can the other public schools adopt such an approach? While the professional accountability in education is hard to accomplish (Darling-Hammond, 1989), some teachers with the support of the principal can try it for the students during the school year.

## 3) Parental Choice

When the teachers are to be professionalized, the practitioner-client relationships should be changed, too. As the patients choose the best medical doctors, the students (and their parents) should have a mechanism to choose the best teachers for a successful education at school. To make it feasible for the choices in a market-oriented strategy

(Burbules & Densmore, 1991b), the public support in tuition, such as voucher system, could be introduced.

#### 4) Community Support for Change

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, there has been a question of whether school is really responsible for the downfall of U.S. economy. The proponents of school reform raised public and political awareness but did not perceive the problem correctly (Parker & Parker, 1995). School is not and should not be solely responsible for all the problems in American education. School is part of a community whose members are all responsible for its success.

First of all, the local government should create a political atmosphere for an active and continuous involvement in schooling of their children. Teacher professionalism and quality education cannot be feasible by the initiatives of teachers alone. The local and the state governments should generate revenues for an equal opportunity for all the children in each community of the state. State government should also take a leadership role by providing framework for change through legislation. Federal government can initiate national standards for teachers and promote means to secure educational equity for the minorities and the children with disabilities.

## IV. CONCLUSION

There are still a few unanswered questions regarding teacher professionalism. Are teachers really responsible for the crises at schools? Will professionalization of teachers solve the entire problem in American education? The American society is willing invest



for a better education for the next generation? Will it be feasible to establish national standards for teachers or national educational goals?

There is another contention that the preoccupation with professionalizing teaching draws attention away from more fundamental problems of schooling in the United States (Burbules & Densmore, 1991a). There is an inevitable link between the school and society (Ayers, 1990). So far, American education toward the social circumstances around the schools was nonjudgmental and many policy makers tried oversimplified approaches to the problems in the society. We need to have a clear sense of fundamental purposes in schooling (Delattre, 1993). In addition, we need schools with professional teachers with expertise, commitment, and leadership. Parents should at least prepare their children for schools. Raising professional standards and improving teacher preparation programs will have little effect unless teaching becomes a more attractive career (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988). While professionalization of teaching is only made possible by a confluence of social, political, and economic circumstance (Burbules & Densmore, 1991a), we need to develop a sense of a community centering around a school among administrators, teachers, students, and their parents.

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