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Teachers' Professionalism, Trust, and Autonomy



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This entry examines what the words “professional” and “professionalism” mean as applied to teachers and the extent to which teachers are recognized as professionals.

The term “professional” can be used in a value-neutral sense to designate a person who earns a living in a given occupation or has obtained a license to practice in a field requiring specific expertise. The term can also be applied in a normative sense to connote that the work of some person, or group of persons, measures up to high standards and, therefore, that such persons ought to be trusted to work autonomously. Because the term is used in these two different ways, we can say, without an air of paradox, that someone works unprofessionally even though we acknowledge that he or she is a professional.

When the word “professional” is applied collectively to all members of an occupation, it is commonly used in the normative sense, connoting trust and autonomy; additionally, a third characteristic is also implied, namely, that members of that occupation take care of a needful public service. As their work is important for the

commonweal, teachers can, without qualification, be said to possess this third characteristic.

The trust in question is commonly justified on two grounds: firstly, because the members of the group have expert knowledge and, secondly, because their conduct is guided by ethical standards. The autonomy typically entails that the group is, to a significant extent, independent of political control and that its members are, at least to some extent, self-governing and in charge of their everyday work.

In most countries, formal education at the tertiary level is required for someone to become a school teacher, and the occupational duties of teachers call for ethical standards. Nevertheless, in many educational systems, teachers' autonomy is narrowly circumscribed, and they are not unreservedly acknowledged as professionals.

In this entry, the reasons why teachers' professionalism is problematic will be outlined. We begin by discussing their expert knowledge and making some brief remarks on the ethics of teaching. The later sections of the entry discuss teachers' autonomy.

Expert Knowledge and Ethical Standards

After primary school attendance became compulsory in most of Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, many countries and states in these two parts of the world established schools at

the secondary level to train and educate teachers. In the United States, for instance, so-called normal schools proliferated in the last quarter of the century, while at the same time, formal teacher training at the secondary level became widespread across Europe. Well into the twentieth century, most schools that offered teacher education programs occupied a level below colleges and universities.

In the United States, this began to change toward the end of the nineteenth century when some normal schools became state colleges and, later, state universities. After that, the migration of pre-service education for primary school teachers, from secondary to tertiary level, took about three quarters of a century. In many other parts of the world, the education of primary school teachers also long remained at the secondary level. Although teacher education has, by and large, taken place within universities since the 1970s, its status is still affected by a history in which it remained below the level of tertiary education, and its relatively low status has also been aggravated by two sorts of doubts and distrust.

On the one hand, there are doubts about the status of education as a field of study. It is unclear to what extent it exists as a separate discipline and to what extent it merely applies results from other fields. And on the other hand, there have been misgivings about the role of teachers' colleges in the furtherance of knowledge about teaching and learning. When the first normal schools in the United States were changed into colleges in the last decades of the nineteenth century, several prestigious universities (including Columbia, Chicago, Stanford, Harvard, and Berkeley) established professorships in pedagogy and educational psychology, focusing on research rather than on the education of teachers. The research done at these institutions, at first mainly in the field of behavioristic psychology, was, for the better part of the last century, seen by political authorities and most academics as more important and more fundamental than any knowledge developed within the teachers' colleges that had recently been upgraded from secondary to tertiary level.

For the reasons mentioned above, the knowledge and skills acquired through teacher education programs have often been less than fully acknowledged as professional expertise. In the 1960s and 1970s, soon after teacher education was firmly established as a university discipline, many institutions attempted to increase the prestige of their programs, and, in the following decades, teacher professionalism was increasingly talked about. Universities sought not only to educate teachers in the subjects they were to teach but also to define a common knowledge base for all teachers, typically focusing on psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy as the foundational disciplines of education. For more than a half a century, one strand in the academic discourse concerning teacher education has thus emphasized theoretical knowledge that is sufficiently deep and broad to enable teachers to develop their practices and to evaluate and choose educational aims and school policies. In the latter half of this period, that is, in the last quarter of a century, another and a very different way of thinking about teacher education has become prominent. During this period, there has been an increasing emphasis on technical know-how, practical training, and the ability to work toward ends that are defined by authorities of superior station. Often, methods developed by researchers are seen as superior to the knowledge that most teachers have at their command. Simultaneously, governments in many parts of the world have attempted to reform primary and secondary school education by defining educational aims, even in minute detail, and by using standardized tests to hold schools and teachers accountable. Policies of this type are often described with the phrase "standard-based accountability."

In their preface to a collection of essays entitled *Philosophical Perspectives on Teacher Education*, Orchard and Oancea (2015) maintain that teacher education "is in a state of flux across the globe." This is nothing new. Throughout the twentieth century, there were conflicts between governmental agencies, universities, and the teaching profession over the control of teacher education. Although there is now a broad

consensus that education at a tertiary level is necessary to prepare teachers for their work and evidence that certified teachers are generally more successful than teachers without such preparation, there is no agreement about the extent to which their pre-service education is sufficient to prepare teachers for their work. Neither is there any generally accepted view on what the content of teacher education programs should be, and one of the long-standing tensions pertains to the role of ethics.

The Ethics of Teaching

Teachers are not only required to apply efficient and successful methods, but they must also be caring, considerate, and even-handed. Nevertheless, most teacher education programs do not contain mandatory courses on ethics.

In recent years, some leading scholars on teacher professionalism such as David Carr, the British philosopher of education, and Chris Higgins, in the United States, have argued for a central role of ethics in teacher education. The gist of some of their arguments is that good teaching requires the ability to apprehend what is educationally desirable and that such apprehension depends on being critically aware of all the values at stake, including ethical values. Moreover, these same scholars argue that good teaching requires more than just ethical knowledge, that ethical virtues are also needed. What follows from this about the desirable content of teacher education programs is still undertheorized. It is not clear how best to prepare future teachers for the moral dimensions of their work and to encourage character traits such as clemency, patience, courage, and fairness. Neither is there any settled view on which ethical virtues, if any, are especially appropriate for teachers.

Most recent work on the role of ethical virtues in teacher education is an offshoot of the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics that started about half a century ago. Scholars who work within this philosophical framework, and draw upon the ethical works of Aristotle, have also posed questions about the intellectual virtues. Arguably, the qualities that make a person a good teacher include intellectual excellences that promote

critical thinking and the pursuit of truth, such as curiosity, perseverance, open-mindedness, scholarly rigor, intellectual honesty, and healthy skepticism.

Different Conceptions of Professional Knowledge

Different ideas about whose knowledge should guide schoolwork and school development, and about the role of ethics, define some of the axes in a multidimensional spectrum of views about the expert knowledge of teachers. An additional axis is defined by different conceptions of professional knowledge in all fields, including medicine, law, and the "people professions," such as teaching and social education.

On the one hand, there are those who think of professional expertise as consisting primarily in a knowledge of theories and facts that can be fully expressed and expounded in books and other media. This stance is sometimes called the propositional view of professional knowledge. On the other hand, there exist diverse views to the effect that parts of the knowledge that legitimizes trust in a profession are tacit or intuitive, only acquired through praxis, and to some extent ineffable. These epistemological views are hard to evaluate, in part because of a lack of agreement on the meaning of key terms. There is, for instance, no consensus concerning how to explain in words what intuition involves. This may be in part because some sorts of nonverbal knowledge or wisdom that highly experienced and deeply skilled professionals have are hard to define in propositional terms.

In recent years, the propositional view has often accompanied ideals of evidence-based practice, emphasizing that all work in public services, including education, should follow procedures that have been scientifically shown to be efficient. Those who go furthest in thinking of professional work as guided by documented rules and written prescriptions come close to advocating what the Irish philosopher of education Joseph Dunne (2011) has described as a "practitioner-proof mode of practice." It does not follow, however, that all who subscribe to the propositional view, and think of professional knowledge as primarily

factual and theoretical, need to think of professional work as fully determined by codified rules. It seems plausible that they have little reason to do so unless they also think of the tasks at hand as being much simpler than those that teachers are most often required to carry out.

If the relevant facts are dependent on happenstance, the life histories of individuals, or the complexity of real situations, they may be, in principle, expressible in words, even if no one is, in fact, able to do so in advance. Professional work may, therefore, be guided by theoretical and factual knowledge, although it cannot be carried out by merely following predetermined procedures and prescribed rules. The interplay between theoretical knowledge, awareness of individual needs and conditions, and familiarity with local contexts can be enormously complex. To apprehend a concrete situation correctly and adjudicate wisely between choices may therefore require judgment that goes beyond following rules that can realistically be laid out in advance. Thus, professional discretion cannot be replaced by mandates from authorities, who know little about the circumstances at hand. Acknowledging this does not require rejection of the propositional view of professional knowledge.

Professional Autonomy and Control from Above

To be able to work as autonomous professionals, teachers need to be able to appraise the aims they work toward and determine the best course of action when different values, such as academic standards and the demands of social justice, pull in different directions. In order to do this, they need both theoretical knowledge and an understanding of the moral standards and values at stake. But it does not follow from these premises alone that teachers should be expected to work as autonomous professionals. Yet if an additional premise is granted, to the effect that general knowledge about teaching and learning cannot be successfully applied without knowing one's students as individuals and being familiar with

the local contexts, then there is a strong case for allowing teachers considerable control over their own work. Nevertheless, the trend in recent years in many parts of the world has been toward increased regulation and centralized control of schoolwork and school curricula.

Educational "reform" that imposes more stringent regulations, external control, and standard-based accountability is quite often eulogized as enhancing teacher "professionalism." Yet it is marked by distrust and has, in many countries, led to the de-professionalization of teachers in the sense that their control over their daily work is more narrowly circumscribed than it was formerly when their pre-service education was still at the secondary level. These developments are controversial, and they are debated on many fronts. Some of the arguments continue a discussion that began more than a century ago.

That Thorndike Won and Dewey Lost

Writing about the history of educational research, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (1989) once said that "one cannot understand the history of education in the United States during the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost." In a later publication, Lagemann (2000) qualified this statement and said that although Dewey lost, "Thorndike's triumph was not complete."

Thorndike was professor of educational psychology at Columbia University from 1904 to 1940 and the most prominent of the behaviorist psychologists in the United States who tried to define a science of education – a science based on solid empirical results that would create the knowledge needed to tell teachers how to teach. At this time, it was already the case that most primary school teachers were women, and the male-dominated universities and political authorities took it for granted that the teachers needed guidance from above.

The philosopher, Dewey, also a professor at Columbia University from 1904, was not only for equality between women and men but also at odds with the hierarchical view of educational knowledge and administration that Thorndike

stood for. In his *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, Dewey defended teachers' autonomy against those who wanted to control schools from above through the imposition of detailed mandates and extrinsic aims or standards. In another work, *The Sources of a Science of Education*, published 13 years later in 1929, Dewey argued against teachers' subordination to intellectual authorities. He claimed that – just as the science of bridge-building only existed among builders of bridges who used knowledge from mathematics, physics, and other sciences – a science of education only existed as applications of many sorts of scientific knowledge by educators. In Dewey's view there was no master science of education, and Thorndike and his ilk were therefore in no position to dictate recipes for teachers to follow. Dewey saw the knowledge needed to improve teaching and learning in schools as developing out of a cooperation between teachers and scholars from many fields of study, and he warned against scientism, that is, too much faith in the ability of scientists to provide ready-made solutions to the problems teachers face.

The main thrust of the two works by Dewey mentioned above is a defense of teachers' professional autonomy. Much of what he said has since been repeated by those who think of teachers' professional expertise as being based simultaneously on experience and on a model of teacher education sufficiently broad and deep to empower them to choose aims appropriate for their students and to cooperate on the development of their practice. Some of his arguments are nowadays restated in different terms by those who speak of action research as a way to generate useful knowledge about teaching and learning. Likewise, some of the arguments of Thorndike and his followers are still repeated by those who speak for standard-based accountability, evidence-based practice, and scientific administration of schools.

Two Different Visions

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the adherents of Thorndike and Dewey have tried to pull teacher education, and the definition of teachers' roles, in opposite directions. In one

camp are those who want school curricula, teaching methods, and procedural rules to be largely prescribed by authorities standing above the teaching profession. In the other camp are those who want teachers to move in the direction of increased professional autonomy.

Most systems of education occupy some middle ground. The self-government of teachers is bound to be limited for several reasons. One of them is that significant parts of the knowledge needed for school development is generated by university researchers and experts who are not school teachers. Another reason is that the most general and overarching aims of publicly funded schools must be defined by political authorities. There are also weighty reasons to grant teachers considerable autonomy. Teachers know their students and can adjust school work to the students' needs and interests. There is also evidence that some of the most successful educational systems in the world allow teachers a high level of control over their work and that the recent move toward more standard-based accountability has not, at least not generally, improved students' performance as measured by standardized tests of the type counselled by the advocates of such policies. There is, however, no well-established consensus on how much autonomy teachers should have, and that is, in part at least, because too little is known about to what extent, and in what ways, children are affected by centralized school administration and management from above.

One of the unanswered questions about the importance of teacher autonomy is the question about how highly regulated schools, where teachers have little control over their work, affect the minds of children. This question was hinted at by Dewey and explicitly raised by Maxine Greene (1973) who argued that teachers needed independence in order to stir their students to seek freedom and define themselves as individuals. If children take after the adults they associate with, then teachers who are controlled by people higher up in the hierarchy may, willy-nilly, end up teaching their students to live under control from above and bringing up a generation lacking in initiative and self-determination.

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