

Should School Teaching be Classified as a Profession? A Twenty First Century Look at this Classic Question

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Abstract: *The question of whether school teaching should be regarded as a profession is a long standing, sensitive and important one. Throughout the twentieth century many people have debated and discussed this concept, resulting in arbitrary and nebulous models being devised in which to compare against teaching. This has resulted in teaching often failing to meet these traditional definitions. This paper suggests that these traditional views of a profession are inappropriate and proposes a new way to think about this question in the twenty first century.*

Keywords: Teachers, profession, education

1. Introduction

Your profession is not what brings home your weekly pay check, your profession is what you're put here on earth to do, with such passion and such intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling.³⁴

This quote, attributed to Vincent van Gogh, provides a somewhat felicitous starting point for this paper as the question of whether school teaching should be regarded as a profession or not has long been debated according to rigid prescribed criteria, but perhaps should be thought about in a much more practical or even philosophical manner.³⁵ The words 'profession' or 'professional' are derived from the Latin word 'profiteor' which literally means to profess but in the twenty first century the same words take on a particular aura in our society and have specific connotations.³⁶ That aura is associated with a professional being accorded a particularly high level of social status and perhaps even an increased monetary reward for the activities they undertake. This paper will examine the historical debate surrounding this question, the various models for the classification of professionals provided in the twentieth century and moves towards offering a new way of thinking of this question for the twenty first century.

2. Defining the concept of a profession

³⁴ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/620676-your-profession-is-not-what-brings-home-your-weekly-paycheck> Date of access 12/8/2013.

³⁵ See for example: Gail M Inlow, 'Is Teaching a Profession?' (1956) 64 *The School Review* 6, Kenneth A Strike, 'Is Teaching a Profession: How Would We Know?' (1990) 4 *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education* Volume 1, Harry S Broudy, 'Teaching: Craft or Profession?' (1956) 20 *The Educational Forum* 2, Richard Pratte & John Rury, 'Teachers, Professionalism and Craft' 93 *Teachers College Record* 1 and Elaine R Martin, 'Is Teaching a Profession' 34 *Journal of Teacher Education* 3.

³⁶ Glenn Langford, *Teaching as a Profession: An Essay in the Philosophy of Education* (Manchester University Press, 1978) 28.

The concept of whether a particular person, occupation or industry can be classed as a profession/professional is a difficult and often emotive issue.³⁷ In many respects it can also be classed as an arbitrary construct as the division over the historical/academic concept and the modern understanding of the term 'profession' is blurred.³⁸ In essence professionals profess. That is, they profess to know better than others and to know better than their clients or the people that they serve.³⁹

Historically it seems that the older, and publicly more respected/recognised, occupations such as Medicine, Theology and Law have been ascribed by society as actually being professions for the longest amount of time.⁴⁰ That is these occupations appear to form the fundamental basis of what it is to be a profession and the various theoretical models which are described latter in this paper appear to have been developed to fit around these traditional professions.

Hoale argues that the ideas and concepts associated with professions and professionalism seem always to have had a high degree of social profile.⁴¹ But this is problematic for teachers, as arguably teaching, in all its various forms, has been with us for the longest amount of time. As Larson indicates, some of the aspects of a profession include "professional association, [a] cognitive base, institutional training, work autonomy and a code of ethics."⁴²

The notion of characterising any industry or occupation as a profession began in the 1930's and peaked in the 1950's and 1960's. Traditionally a profession has been characterised as an occupation that accorded a certain degree of respect, authority, and autonomy as well as being a body which has an ascribed area of knowledge.

In the 1930's the Trait model of professionalism was proffered as a means of defining the concept of a profession by virtue of specific characteristics being present. This model was based on the traits from the medical and legal professions at the time, which were widely regarded as the archetype of what a profession should aspire to be.⁴³

The generally accepted traits were:

1. A skill based on knowledge
2. Specified training and education

³⁷ Terence J Johnson, *Professions and Power* (Macmillan, 1972).

³⁸ Ignacio L Gotz, *Zen and the Art of Teaching* (Wilkerson Publishing Company, 1988).

³⁹ Bob Lingard, *Pedagogizing teacher professional identities* (Routledge, 2009) 67.

⁴⁰ Robert Dingwall & Phillip Lewis, *The Sociology of the Professions: Lawyers, Doctors and Others* (St. Martin's Press, 1983).

⁴¹ Cyril O Hoale, *Continuing Learning in the Professions* (Jossey-Bass, 1981) 10.

⁴² Magali S Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A sociological Analysis* (University of California Press, 1977) 208.

⁴³ Gerald D Taylor & Robert Runte, *Thinking About Teaching: An Introduction* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995).

3. Certification based upon set standards and testing
4. A formal organisation
5. Adherence to a code of conduct
6. Altruistic service⁴⁴

The trait model was very practical and prescriptive and had specific criteria such as members possession of knowledge, autonomy, specialised training and a high moral character. But in essence it meant that many highly accomplished industries or occupations would never be capable of aspiring to this high status.

3. The different models/theories of professionalism

Any attempt to resort to literature for a concrete definition of 'professional' or 'profession' is met with severe limitations. Academic arguments revealed by the literature demonstrate a tendency to treat these terms as arbitrary constructs. Thus, the large corpus of literature on this topic is diverse, vague and often contradictory.⁴⁵ Indeed Eraut could not put this more simply when he states:

The professions are a group of occupations the boundary of which is ill defined.⁴⁶

The literature first seems to attempt to define a profession using a variety of methods/models, most of which are nebulous and contradictory.⁴⁷ Brennan attempts to summarise many of the common lists of characteristics which academic writers have continuously put forward as being conclusive versions of just what constitutes a profession.⁴⁸ The simplest, which Brennan claims is one of the most frequently cited, is the one decided in 1975 by the American Association of Professors of Higher Education. Brennan cites it thus, stating that a profession must incorporate the following seven elements:

1. An organised body of intellectual theory constantly expanded by research.

⁴⁴ Adapted from the work of Geoffrey Millerson, *The Qualifying Association: A Study in Professionalisation* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) 5.

⁴⁵ In particular Barrie Brennan, *Continuing Professional Education: Promise and Performance* (Australian Council for Education Research, 1990), John A Jackson (Ed.), *Professions and Professionalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), Peter Jarvis, *Professional Education* (Croom Helm., 1983) and Amitai Etzioni (Ed.), *The semi-professions and their organisations: teachers, nurses, social workers* (Free Press, 1969).

⁴⁶ Michael Eraut, *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence* (Falmer Press, 1994) 1.

⁴⁷ Linda Valli & Marilyn Chambliss, 'Creating Classroom Cultures: One teacher, Two Lessons and a High-Stakes Test' (2007) 38 *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 1.

⁴⁸ Barrie Brennan, *Continuing Professional Education: Promise and Performance* (Australian Council for Education Research, 1990) 7.

2. An intellectual technique.
3. A close-knit association of members with a high quality of communication between them.
4. A period of long training.
5. A series of standards and an enforced statement of ethics.
6. Applications to the practical affairs of man.
7. Active influence on public policy in its field.

The seven point model as described here by Brennan is problematic in itself because it raises many questions about how these criteria are to be fulfilled. For example, how much time is it that would constitute the criteria as listed in point four 'A period of long training'? Is this to be 6 months, 12 months, 3 years or longer? Further, who is to determine this length of time? These points are at best arbitrary and nebulous and open to considerable debate.

Hoale⁴⁹ provides an even more complex set of criteria, claiming that there are fourteen fundamental characteristics of a profession, these being:

1. Conceptual characteristics.
2. Mastery of theoretical knowledge.
3. Capacity to solve problems.
4. Use of practical knowledge.
5. Self-enhancement.
6. Formal training.
7. Credentialing.
8. Creation of a subculture.
9. Legal reinforcement.
10. Public acceptance.
11. Ethical practice.
12. Penalties.

⁴⁹ Cyril O Hoale, *Continuing Learning in the Professions* (Jossey-Bass, 1981) 35-73.

13. Relations to other vocations.

14. Relations to users of service.

In reality the characteristics listed here by Hoale are vague and indeterminate. To be of any significance they require detailed explication. For example, unless the indicia are made clear it may be impossible to determine 'conceptual characteristics' as listed in point one. Further, unless the elements of criteria number seven 'credentialing' are made clear it is impossible to ascertain whether self credentialing, independent credentialing or even government credentialing is what would be required. It may well be a moot point whether any profession satisfies each and every one of these criteria. Take for example the recognised profession of Law, depending on the contextualisation that each of the fourteen criteria was given it may struggle to fulfil every one of the criteria.

Hoale's list seems too vague to be acceptable to all professions, perhaps even to those which are already widely accepted as being professions. Take for example point number two on Hoale's list of criteria. This criteria specifies a recognition of mastery of theoretical knowledge applicable to the profession. But there remains a question here as to who is in a position to classify whether any individual has achieved this mastery.

Lieberman acknowledges the inherent vagaries of these definitions by making it clear that there is:

...no authoritative set of criteria by means of which we can distinguish professions from other occupations.⁵⁰

Instead Lieberman states that whilst there may be continuing debate and no concrete definition of professionalism available there are certain accepted characteristics which would be uniform within any accepted definition. There are eight such characteristics described by Lieberman⁵¹ and they are:

1. A unique, definite, and essential social service.
2. An emphasis upon intellectual techniques in performing its service.
3. A long period of specialised training.
4. A broad range of autonomy for both the individual practitioners and for the occupational group as a whole.

⁵⁰ Myron H Lieberman, *Education as a Profession* (Prentice-Hall, 1956) 1.

⁵¹ Myron H Lieberman, *Education as a Profession* (Prentice-Hall, 1956) 2-6.

5. An acceptance by the practitioners of broad personal responsibility for judgements made and acts performed within the scope of professional autonomy.
6. An emphasis upon the service to be rendered, rather than the economic gain to the practitioners, as the basis for the organisation and performance of the social service delegated to the occupational group.
7. A comprehensive self-governing organisation of practitioners.
8. A code of ethics which has been clarified and interpreted at ambiguous and doubtful points by concrete cases.

Clearly these characteristics of professionalism encompass much of what has been detailed for the models espoused and detailed by Brennan and Hoale, but they manage to do so in a much more detailed way. As such these characteristics by Lieberman may provide a more useful model for determining the status of teaching.

Other writers have been even more subjective in their interpretation of what constitutes a profession and in particular why teaching will never categorically fit into any of these arbitrary definitions.⁵² Academics, such as Leggatt⁵³, have different perceptions of what constitutes a profession. Leggatt states that the characteristics which are most frequently cited are the following:

1. Practice is founded upon a base of theoretical, esoteric knowledge.
2. The acquisition of knowledge requires a long period of education and socialisation.
3. Practitioners are motivated by an ideal of altruistic service rather than pursuit of material and economic gain.
4. Careful control is exercised over recruitment, training, certification and standards of practice.
5. The colleague group is well organised and has disciplinary powers to enforce a code of ethical practice.

The synthesis of ideals by Leggatt is itself incredulous. Leggatt does not make it clear if a profession has to encompass all these points or only needs to have mastered a number of them and be working towards achieving them all in order to constitute a profession. Certainly most professions would find it hard to justify that they are satisfying the criteria of point three, teaching included.

⁵² Donald A Myers, 'The Teacher as a Service Professional' (2008) 30 *Action in Teacher Education* 1, 4-11.

⁵³ Timothy Leggatt in John A Jackson (Ed.), *Professions and Professionalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 155-156.

Leggatt tacitly acknowledges this problem when he states:

...teachers lack professional authority and independence: they do not control recruitment to the profession, training or certification nor do they determine their own practice (they cannot turn away clients or fix fees) or conditions of service.⁵⁴

4. Modern thought and application

In the twenty first century the term professional has evolved and as Hafferty and Castellani indicated many now consider the term to refer to any field that has specific tools and knowledge.⁵⁵ Indeed many occupations now simply define themselves as professionals without any reference to the prescribed criteria debate that occurred in the last century.

The highly, often overly complex, models as described earlier in this paper, which proliferated the debate over professional status in the twenty first century has achieved little. In essence, with many of the criteria being poorly defined and unachievable for many modern occupations their value is now highly debatable. Instead what is now necessary is a new way of thinking about this concept for the twenty first century, as arguably many occupations, particular new and emerging occupations, but particularly the occupation of teaching could never have hoped to have achieved all of the criteria from the different models that have historically been proffered.

The basis of what constitutes a profession then, should be based on the relationship between the holders of the requisite body of knowledge and the body of knowledge itself.⁵⁶ This is a relationship which provides both authority and legitimacy. The owners of the body of knowledge set the required levels of knowledge required for entrance to the profession, that is the standards and how this will be assessed. The fundamental basis for any profession therefore seems to be knowledge and its application.

Given that knowledge is key, there needs to be a recognition that the body of knowledge which was required for entry to the professional body will need to be maintained and continually updated as there are advances which are relevant to the particular profession itself As Jarvis states, it is essential:

...that the professional is one who continually seeks the mastery of the branch of learning upon which his occupation is based...In order to be the master of a

⁵⁴ Timothy Leggatt in John A Jackson (Ed.), *Professions and Professionalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 160.

⁵⁵ Frederic W Hafferty & Brian Castellani, 'The Increasing Complexities of Professionalism' (2010) 85 *Academic Medicine* 2.

⁵⁶ Bruce A Kimball, 'The problem of teachers' authority in light of the structural analysis of professions' (1988) 38 *Educational Theory* 1.

branch of learning it is essential for a practitioner to continue his learning after initial education...⁵⁷

Given the difficulties outlined, it is therefore reasonable to propose a new definition of a profession for the purposes of teachers. Such a definition may overlap with many of the key elements highlighted by the literature as detailed in this paper, but acknowledges that the occupation of teaching is unique and is therefore outside of the scope of the definitions with which the literature deals. That definition will need to be more progressive and to move on from the dogmatic heavily prescriptive criteria which has unnecessarily proliferated the debate over this topic in the twentieth century.

For the purpose of this paper, it is submitted that teachers will be regarded as members of a profession on the basis of them fulfilling the following synthesised criteria:

1. A recognised group of members who have undertaken a systematic and prescribed method of formal training over an extended period of time.
2. An established unified independent governing body
3. Methodological behaviour based on a theoretical body of knowledge which is the basis of ongoing research and refinement.

Note that these criteria have not been chosen so as to make the definition of what constitutes a profession impossible to achieve or something which can only be achieved by a small number of elite occupations. Instead the criteria has been chosen because, whilst it maintains a synthesis of the key features of what has traditionally constituted a profession, it also represents a chance to look at this issue from a twenty first century perspective in a world where now the term is used in a more progressive manner.

4.1 A recognised group of members who have undertaken a systematic and prescribed method of formal training over an extended period of time

The basis of this criteria is that the members of the group will have to undertake formal training. This training could be provided by recognised tertiary institutions or by the professional group directly. It would be the professional group which set not only the prescribed content for the course of instruction but also the length of time that the course of instruction was to be delivered over. On the basis that teachers undertook such prescribed training they would meet this criteria.

This criteria would also include provision for a requirement of ongoing training, which is typical of the historically acknowledged professions such as law and medicine. As such, teachers would

⁵⁷ Peter Jarvis, *Professional Education* (Croom Helm., 1983) 27.

be required to undertake ongoing professional learning that is recognised by the governing body, in order to maintain their status or their 'licence' to teach.

4.2 An established unified independent governing body

The structure of the profession is an important criteria. A profession should be regulated by a unified independent governing body that is free from government influence and financially independent of any government or system. A body which is free to set its own standards and to enforce those standards. A body which is free to admit people based on those standards and which is free to expel people if they not meet those required standards.

This body would ensure a consistent approach to ethical practice and standards of conduct, and also be responsible for taking action against members who breached the ethical standards or code of conduct. The body would be charged with the issuing of a 'licence' or permission to belong to the profession and maintain a list of those who are currently registered as meeting the set criteria for registration.

4.3 Methodological behaviour based on a theoretical body of knowledge which is the basis of ongoing research and refinement

The key basis for this criteria is that the practice of the professional body is not random or arbitrary. Instead the activities of the professional body need to be grounded in a credible body of knowledge. Knowledge that has been rigorously debated by academics and proven in practice.

Knowledge here represents more than just a familiarity with facts or information, instead it represents the conceptualisation of the activities of teaching. That is the theoretical underpinnings of the craft itself as emphasises by writers such as Passmore⁵⁸, Tyler⁵⁹, Taba⁶⁰, Haberman⁶¹, Stronge⁶², Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde⁶³ who discuss relevant matters which range from the fundamental basis of the philosophy of teaching and curriculum to the practical realities of this activity.

⁵⁸ John Passmore, *The Philosophy of Teaching* (John Wiley, 1980).

⁵⁹ Ralph W Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (The University of Chicago Press, 1949).

⁶⁰ Hilda Taba, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* (Harcourt Brace and World, 1962).

⁶¹ Martin Haberman, 'The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching' in Elizabeth Hatton (Ed.), *Understanding teaching: curriculum and the social context of schooling* (Harcourt Brace, 1994).

⁶² James Stronge (Ed.), *Evaluating Teaching: A Guide to Current Thinking and Best Practice* (Corwin Press, Inc, 1997).

⁶³ Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, & Arthur Hyde, *BEST PRACTICE: Today's Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools (3rd Ed)* (Heinemann, 2005).

There must also be recognition that any profession is dynamic, and the body of accepted knowledge will evolve and change over time, which reinforces the importance of ongoing professional learning in 4.1.

5. Conclusion

Teachers in our society undertake an inherently difficult task, a task which is of great importance to the whole of society. Burbules and Densmore note that the preoccupation over the question of whether teaching should be accorded the status of being a profession is "tenacious and seductive" and wastes an inordinate amount of time that may be better spent on more productive matters.⁶⁴ But, being a member of a profession is an aspiration that many in society would hold. Indeed people look towards receiving advice or a service from a professional because they believe that it will be delivered with a higher degree of skill and confidence and people may want to belong to a profession on the perceived basis of being accorded a higher salary or increased social status.⁶⁵

The concept of what constitutes a profession may be an ideological one rather than a concept based on prescriptive criteria.⁶⁶ Given a strict adherence to the traditional literature examined, it is doubtful whether the occupation of teaching could currently be considered a profession. From the traditional literatures perspective the best that teachers could regard themselves as is an emerging profession. There could be an endless debate as to whether criteria such as salary, degree of control, period of training, autonomy, ethics, standards, altruism and a body of knowledge should be the prescribed criteria as to whether any particular occupation should be judged as a profession, however these historical characteristics have been too poorly defined to be of much practical value.

This paper has proposed a much simpler, more refined method of examining the status of the teaching profession against more realistic ideals, which are relevant to the twenty first century. It is explicitly acknowledged that the definition of what constitutes a profession is now a lot easier to satisfy than under those traditional definitions. Other groups of workers such as plumbers, accountants, engineers, bakers and even hair dressers could conceivably now satisfy this more liberal definition. This is not necessarily a concern as the twenty first century way of examining the concept should be much more liberal than it had been in the twentieth century. Effectively making the criteria of what constitutes a profession and therefore potentially providing teachers with the status of being a professional may raise their self esteem without causing any harm to the term 'professional'.

⁶⁴ Nicholas C Burbules & Kathleen Densmore, 'The Persistence of Professionalism: Breakin' Up is Hard to Do' (1991) 5 *Educational Policy* 2. 156.

⁶⁵ Peter Jarvis, *Professional Education* (Croom Helm., 1983) 20.

⁶⁶ Magali S Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A sociological Analysis* (University of California Press, 1977) xvii.