

Teacher Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are responsible for the education and well being of the students, and they serve as an influential role model in Students lives. The teachers' ethical and personal qualities of empathy, care, respect, fairness, motivation, determination, and a strong belief that they can make a difference in a student's life dispositions associated with professionalism. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how teacher professionalism is defined in scholarly debates in recent times. Within this purpose the definitions of professionalism, criteria of professionalism, and the characteristics of a professional teacher and status of teacher professionalism will be discussed from different perspectives. This paper will offer an operational definition of teacher professionalism and an integrative approach about multiple interpretations of teacher professionalism in sociological, political and educational context. In the light of multiple approaches, it will be concluded that teacher professionalism means meeting certain standards in education and it is related to proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of professionalism is defined from the point of different perspectives and then how these definitions are associated to teaching profession is analyzed. The concept of professionalism in teaching is commonly discussed on sociological, educational and ideological bases in the literature. Secondly, the key ideas of professionalism approaches underlying these bases are reflected in brief. Lastly, in the light of multiple perspectives and arguments, a workable definition for today's teacher professionalism conception and its interpretation embracing these perspectives have been tried to be presented. Medical

professionalism is a challenging, evolving, and life-long endeavor.¹ George Bernard Shaw² stated that modern medical professionalism includes the ability to communicate specialist knowledge, diagnosis and treatment options in an easy-to-understand way, rather than seeking to use specialist knowledge as a means to create distance from, and a dependency of, the public. The purpose of this review is to establish the basis of teacher professionalism. In order to do so, number of questions need to be explored. The first one is whether it is valid to talk about teacher professionalism at all. There has long been conflict about whether teaching can be termed a profession or whether it is more

appropriately classified as a semi-profession. If so, what does that mean? Finding answers to these questions necessitates an examination of different formulations of 'profession' to establish how these relate to the occupation of being a teacher. This also pursues a number of avenues of enquiry that applied to conception of teacher professionalism, with particular emphasis on the knowledge base of teaching.

Teacher professionalism encompasses the key characteristics of professional competence, performance, and conduct. Competence refers to the teachers' knowledge of their subject area, as well as their understanding of teaching methods. Performance refers to instructional strategies and the ability to communicate the curriculum to students. Professional conduct includes behavior, language, and personal appearance, as well as attitude and dispositions.

Dispositions are guided by our beliefs and attitudes. They are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence our behaviors toward students, families, colleagues and communities. They affect our students' learning, motivation, and development and guide our professional growth.

Professional conduct includes a number of components that are necessary to effectively do the job. Examples include: being on time, demonstrating professional writing and verbal skills, being prepared to teach, dressing appropriately, having classroom materials prepared and organized and maintaining confidentiality.

In historical context, the issue that whether teaching is a professional status or not has been controversial. According to some authors,^{3,4} teaching is a semi-professional job because they are directed to perform certain standards by their superiors. As a result of this teachers' individual autonomy and decision making powers are limited. Other authors^{5,6} believe that it is more useful to approach professionalism as an

ideological construct that is used for occupational control on teachers. Another approach⁷ reflects a positive attitude towards teacher professionalism and identifies the term as the best highest standards for teachers.

The need to attain and develop certain standards and benchmarking criteria for all professions has increased in today's competitive work conditions. Standards create a professional environment of "best practice" procedures enabling organizations to confidently create systems, policies and procedures; they also assure high operational quality.⁸ This phenomenon makes a current issue of improving the occupation standards and qualifications of teachers to comply with the up to date developments like other occupation groups in other organizations. At this position, the concept of professionalism comes into importance which is considered to be the key elements of effectiveness in work life.

The concept has been controversial one in different occupation groups with a long history especially in sociological ground and still it is the subject of many scholarly debates. The dynamic nature of the term and its multiple interpretations establish different definitions of the concepts with different functions. When the subject is teacher professionalism,⁹ the meaning of the term changes as response to external pressures, public discourses and scientific developments. However, it seems possible to make workable professionalism definition in the field of education based on these different approaches. So, it would be useful to begin with some definitions.

1. The Concept of Profession

Alistair Cook, American journalist (1908-2004) stated that, a profession can be defined as an occupation or 'calling', especially one involving a degree of skill, learning or science or "a trade or occupation pursued for higher motives, to a proper standard".¹⁰

The distinction is usually drawn between a professional (i.e., someone who earns a living from their trade or occupation), and an amateur (i.e., someone who might do the same or a similar thing, but without remuneration). But the difference is not simply that one is paid and the other is not, because a 'professional' performance is one which is good, polished and of a high quality, whereas an 'amateurish' performance is the opposite---however much or little payment might have been received. But all professions are conspiracy against the laity.²

A logical conclusion is that if a person intends to rely upon a certain trade or occupation as their main source of income, then they would need to be proficient at it, and be recognized as being so.

A rise of the classical or 'true' professions brought about another social class distinction, namely between 'professional' and 'semi-professionals' or 'para-professionals'.³² Those who served the medieval courts of Europe as physicians, jurists, ambassadors and bureaucrats were accorded professional status, in a social order maintained by 'professional armies'.³³ 'Semi-professionals' or 'para-professionals' performed similar services for ordinary people: the barber who shaved and trimmed hair but who also performed surgical procedures and extracted teeth, practitioners of folk medicine and midwives (Singman, cited in Crook, *ibid*).

It was only in mid-nineteenth century that a broadening of professional groups started to occur across Western Europe and North America. Crook³³ also notes developments further afield that in China the distinction between 'profession' and 'occupation' was first made in 1929, when doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, professors and journalists were officially identified as elite professionals.

2. The Concept of Professionalism

In relation to changing historical, political and social contexts, it is indispensable to establish the

conceptions of teacher professionalism as its multiple meanings have altered and developed over time and in contestation between rival stakeholder groups and their interests.¹¹ The concept of professionalism is used in different senses and rather difficult to define. For example, in daily language, it is generally used to imply an activity for which one is to pay as opposed to doing voluntarily. The term is also used to classify the status of profession groups in terms of responsibility.¹² In business world; professionalism is generally synonymous with "success" or refers to the expected behaviors of individuals in specific occupations.¹³

The terms "profession" and "professor" have their etymological roots in the Latin for profess. To be a professional or a professor was to confess to be an expert in some skill or field of knowledge.¹⁴ In 1975, Holy defined professionalism as 'those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and condition'.¹⁵ In his another work, he states that professionalism is related to the improvement in the quality of service rather than the enrichment of status.¹⁶ If we synthesize the definitions up to now, it is possible to interpret professionalism as a multi dimensional structure including one's work behaviors and attitudes to perform the highest standards and improve the service quality. Dame Janet Smith stated that: "Professionalism is a basket of qualities that enables us to trust our advisor." It 'focuses on question of what qualifications and acquired capacities, what competence is required for the successful exercise of an occupation.¹⁷ Bull¹⁸ stated that autonomy is a component of teacher professionalism and it provides individual decision making area to achieve one's aims and outcome of controlling the situation related to his/her work. It is not only functions as a buffer against the pressures on teachers but is also a means of strengthening them in terms of personal and professional sense.¹⁸ Consequently; it has an opposite role of organizational control.^{19, 20}

It appears that the focuses on defining and conceptualizing the nature of professionalism are, “the respectability status of the occupation”,¹² improvement of service quality,¹⁶ “achievement of the highest standards”,²¹ “self-control”²² and “professional autonomy”.^{3, 19,20,23}

3. Teacher Professionalism

Is teaching a profession?

Whether teaching counts as a profession or not has long been a vexed issue.²⁴⁻²⁸ Using the conceptual framework developed thus far the first argument would be that no modern profession can emulate the ideal-type traits of the classical professions—not even modern versions of those professions themselves.

For this reason Etzioni grouped teachers, nurses and social workers among the ‘semi-professions’.²⁹ Some authors argue that quasi or semiprofessions fail the definitional test of a profession in different point of view.²⁵ Beck concurs that one of the main reasons for its semi-professional positioning was that the school teaching was and remains a strongly feminized occupation.³⁰

Leiter³ observes that occupations such as teaching and nursing claim professional status but are not completely accorded this status because their individual autonomy is often under organizational control. More specifically, teachers are monitored by their administrators in terms of the consistency between their performance and the standards set before. As a result, they are directed and shaped by the administrators to achieve organizational goals so their autonomy is restricted. Samuels⁴ supports these arguments asserting the public school teachers do not have a high level of authority since the major decisions in education settings are taken by them.

Depending on the educational context, it is possible to say that definitions of teacher professionalism focus on teachers’ professional

qualifications such as ‘being good at his/her job’, “fulfilling the highest standards”, and “achieving excellence”. Baggini claims that for today’s teachers, professionalism is interpreted in terms of what extent the teachers’ outcome the difficulties and what extent they are able to use their skills and experiences related to their profession.¹⁴ On the most basic level, ‘professional teacher refers to the category of a person who is remunerated to teach’; on a higher level, it can refer to teachers who represent the best in the profession and set the highest standards.¹³ Phelps believes professionalism is enhanced when teachers use excellence as a critical criterion for judging their actions and attitudes.⁷ In other words, professionalism is measured by the best and the highest standards.

New understanding of teacher professionalism provides professional liberty and provisions for teachers to take responsibility in their practices. Sachs calls this transition from old to new understanding as “transformative professionalism”.⁹ Sachs’s approach to teacher professionalism can be interpreted as a challenge to revitalize the concept in rapidly changing work environment. He believes the teacher professionalism issue as a social and political strategy to promote the status of teaching profession. His approach is an alternative and up to date one when compared to traditional approach. It will be concluded that there is a consensus to a great extent that the purpose behind the teacher professionalism attempts in ideological base are viewed as occupational control and authorizing teachers by strength-ening the work demands.

CONCLUSION

In the glow of the different approaches to teacher professionalism in scholarly debates, it is evident that the meanings accredited to teacher professionalism and the grade of teaching has a dynamic characteristic. This dynamism stems

from the political and social changes and results in the variable meaning and status of the teaching profession in historical context. The up to date explanations of teacher professionalism has a modified meaning from the earlier beliefs in the sense that teachers confront with multiple pressures, exaggerated work demands and more occupational control in recent times.

It could be concluded from the discussions that we cannot talk about an agreement on the conceptualization of the term. On the other hand, considering the scholarly debates up to now, "teacher professionalism" could be interpreted as a professional work field with its sociological, ideological and educational dimensions. That aims at achieving the highest standards in teaching profession which is based upon knowledge, skill and importance. It is also associated with improving the quality and standards of teachers' works, their public images and meeting certain standards in education that related to proficiency. However, the meaning of the term and status of teaching profession is considered to be highly problematic and polarized in various spheres. At this instant, Whitty stated, it is probably best to see the different events about teacher professionalism in the twenty-first century as competing editions of teacher professionalism to a certain extent that consider any one as an indispensable for characterization of professionalism.³¹

Conflicts of Interest: None

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