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## **The Dilemma of Teaching as a Profession**

Teaching is a polymorphous activity: it quite literally takes many different forms. Manifestly, teaching is no one specific activity readily identifiable in general circumstances. The word is used in various ways, and definitions of it often lead to or underlie controversial discussion in pedagogical circles. The unpacking of various definitions of teaching then would be an interesting undertaking. However, in the context of this essay the term 'teaching' would be used to refer to an occupation or a profession – 'the profession of one who instructs or educates' (Smith, 1969). On the other hand, the term 'profession' which means 'an employment' is not a precise descriptive concept but more on



evaluative concept. As Hughes (1961) has put it: 'the term profession is a symbol for a desired conception of one's work and hence, of one's self'.

But according to Hoyle (1980) 'the term profession is less analytic than symbolic and represents the right and privileges which an occupation desires for itself and also the social service which it offers. The functionalist view of the profession, which is essentially the view the professionals tend to hold of themselves – incorporates the following elements which has the built-in value assumptions (Lieberman, 1958; Hoyle, 1982).

Professions perform a distinctive social function. This function requires the exercise of skills which are based on a body of knowledge. This



knowledge is systematic and theoretical and the practitioner requires a lengthy period of training in order to acquire it. The practitioner exercises his skills and knowledge in contexts where judgment predominates over routine. Thus, the practitioner has to afford a relatively high degree of autonomy. Professional skills and knowledge require a lengthy period of training which is also a period of socialization into the profession.

The essence of these values is the priority of client's interests and they are frequently expressed in a code of ethics or practice. The specialized knowledge of the professions makes it appropriate that they should have a strong voice in shaping public policy in their areas of interest.



Indisputably teaching satisfies partly, if not fully, the above widely accepted criteria of a profession. However, teaching remains unsure of its own position and status and unclear about whether it is a profession in any public and precise sense of that term. Etzioni, (1969) classifies teaching as a semi-profession. In the subsequent paragraphs I will discuss some of the obstacles that hinder the development of teaching as a profession.



## **Teaching is a Mass Profession**

The expansion of education every where has forced the entry to teaching became uncontrollable and unrealistically enormous. For example there are about half-a million teachers in England, about 280,000 in Malaysia (Kementerian Pendidikan, 1995), about 100,000 in Australia (Bessant and Spaul, 1982) and about 300,000 in Nigeria (Bray, 1981). While some profession regularly turn away large numbers of would be members, teaching fall into the category of fields of chronic shortage. Such situation undermines attempts to raise entry standards; the certification machinery already developed has been violated by thousands of teachers with temporary certificates. In Malaysia, for example, about ten percent of the teaching



force is “temporary and untrained” (Arfah, 1980), while in Nigeria as Uche (1980) reports about 64 percent of the primary teachers are ‘untrained’.

Because of the mass intake into teaching the quality and commitment of those taken into the service has been poor. In most cases teaching was often a desperate last resort or the left over in the educational system to seek employment, often only as a temporary measure and as a stepping stone to other careers. Mason’s (1961) study of American teachers indicated that half of the teachers he surveyed did not expect to stay in teaching for more than five years. Such state will inoculate lack of commitment to the teaching task and naturally a barrier to the improvement of the prestige of teaching. While membership of the major professions implies a commitment to



the task, such a life commitment is not apparent to teaching. This is one of the major obstacles in the development of teaching as a profession.





## **Teaching Has Loosely Defined Frontiers**

Teaching, unlike surgery, is an activity with loosely defined frontiers. This is because there are many who become teacher with different assumptions, intentions, intellectual equipment and qualifications. For example, in England as Judge (1980) observes, many of the distinguished practitioners within the university have no training at all. Besides, no universally recognized pattern of education and training for teachers ever existed. For instance, while industrialized countries are moving towards an all graduate teaching force, in Third world countries still with secondary education. As the final academic award obtained by the majority of members of the profession can be regarded as a general indication of its members' intellectual



standards, the diversity of academic qualification in teaching must investate against the status of teaching. Such diversity does not exist in medical, legal or other established profession.

Furthermore, there has been no agreement on what the necessary content of teacher training might be (Taylor, 1969). For example, in England, the dual system of curriculum and schooling, led naturally to a double system of training for teaching. Grammar and public schools teachers in the past nearly always received their general education at the universities and thereafter followed a one year course of graduate training in the university Department of Education. However, the teachers for the other schools were recruited at the earliest possible age and given the shortest possible course of basic training in



institutions outside the universities (Dent, 1977). In contrast, Nigeria has to accept entrance as young as eleven due to it's acute teacher shortages but have a longer training course of five or seven years which compensates to some extent for the low entry level (Dove, 1982), while China takes entrance as old as twenty one. The severe shortage of teachers mean that teacher training institutions must continue to accept less able school levers with low qualification who enter training with low professional motivation, regarding it merely as a mean to continue their formal schooling.

This is undeniably the dilemma of many third world countries. On the contrary all these diverse pattern of training, different entry qualifications and different content of teacher training divide



teachers into different categories which consolidate a pattern of rival professionalism and strengthen the barrier lying across the path to professional and academic respectability. Other professions like law and medicine, however, express little doubt about what should be the content of their long pre-service course. Such professions can defend their frontier most successfully and control its access to training and when it is small (Schein, 1974). Each of these generalisations is historically true of medicine. None applies to teaching (Waller, 1932). This is another obstacle in development of teaching as a profession.



## **Feminization of Teaching**

Teaching provides an opportunity for women to enter modern sector employment while managing a household and family. Furthermore it is clearly congruent with feminine socialization, work styles and familial roles. Thus in most countries teaching recruits a higher preponderance of women than men and in spite of the drop out of women in their early years of teaching they constitute sixty percent of the full time teaching force (Hoyle, 1980). In America, although teaching ranks thirty fifth on the National Opinion Research Centre (NORC) list in general, it is first among those occupations largely populated by women (Lortie, 1966). In Australia' women represent 54 percent of the teaching force (Bessant and



Spaul' 1972). It is undeniable that teaching is socially desirable for women every where. However, it is a commonplace observation that feminization of teaching has a detrimental effect on the status of the teaching force. As Lortie observed, to date the only occupations which have achieved professional recognition have been male occupations. It is argued that women tend to be less mobile in teaching due to their family commitment (Benson, 1961) and maternal responsibilities: thus a woman's stay in a school is often short term and some what unpredictable. Besides, it is claimed women are prepared to undermine salary levels by accepting low pay and, in Dove's view (1982); they lend to lack militancy in the course of professionalization. In addition, the peculiarity of women as what Caplow (1964) has termed the 'special



conditions' attaching to female employment such as the fact that their career are often intermittent that they are secondary breadwinners in the family, and the cultural norms discriminated against appointment to superior positions over men despite the fact there has been a steady improvement in the social status of women in the society since the nineteenth century.

All these claims create fear that increasing feminisation is detrimental to the status of teaching even though many of these claims have yet to be fully substantiated. Nevertheless they do indicate the status insecurity characteristics of the teaching profession. We have yet to see whether any occupation predominantly feminine in composition can or will achieve clear title to be honorific profession.



## **Lack of Professional Confidence and Autonomy**

Another main obstacle in the development of teaching as a profession is that teachers never enjoyed the degree of professional confidence and autonomy which marks the practice of medicine and law. This is because the activity of teaching is much less exact and narrow than those other practices with which it is most often wistfully compared (Judge, 1974). No one, not even the most ferocious defender of the arcane dignity of teaching has claimed that teaching can be effectively performed by teachers alone. As Cremin (1976) rightly remarks, almost every conversation, every parental direction, every newspaper or TV program, every sermon can properly be represented as a contribution to





teaching. Unlike medicine and law, teaching as Langford (1978) rightly claims, occupies no sharply determine territory because the tasks performed by teachers vary greatly along a number of dimensions.

Furthermore, what is taught by teachers in school is presumed to be known by almost all adults and teachers have not been able to convince many critics and more importantly legislatures that methods courses constitute a truly distinct and impressive body of knowledge. The subjects teachers themselves believe useful in teaching, such as child psychology, are primarily the property of others. Lacking the clear autonomy which leads to the assurance that professional knowledge will provide the basis of action, teachers have not developed codified and



systematic bodies of professional knowledge, and lacking that knowledge, their stance vis-a-vis laymen, are, and in turn weakened. The work of teachers has less autonomy as their work day is lightly regulated by timetabling and detailed reporting on performance is required and supervisors are allowed to make surprise visits to check on work being done. No doctor will be asked to report to an administrative supervisor on why he carried out his medical duties in the way he did. As a professional he has the ultimate responsibility for his professional decision.

The surgeon has to decide whether or not to operate the ultimate justifications for a professional act is that it is, to the best of the professional's knowledge, the right act. However the autonomy possessed by teachers



is not the collectively shared right of recognized professionals. Almost every one can challenge what the teacher taught, why and how he taught them. Taylor (1970) cites many remarks made upon teachers and their tasks:

‘I didn’t send my girl to school to learn to cook, her mother can teach her at home’ ‘A GCE is no use to me. I want a boy who can write a legible handwriting, spell correctly and do what is told’

‘Why don’t the schools teach them to speak properly?’

‘They should all receive sex instructions. Mere biology isn’t enough’



Even simple and ordinary farmers have a say in what the teacher teaches. Siege cited how they object the teaching of Ashanti folklore in West Indies school because in ethical characters who were cunning like Anancy, the spider king only taught children to lie and thief' (Siann, & Unguegbu, 1980)



## Teaching and the Social Class

It seems that occupations of professional status have been in the past the monopoly of the elite and middle class members of the society. This is explicitly demonstrated as thus:

“Medicine would lose immeasurably if the proportion of (middle class) students in the future were to be reduced in favour of precocious children who qualified for subsidies from local authorities and the state, purely on the basis of examination results”. (Catgrove, 1962). Teaching has been one means of upward social mobility for the intelligent working class individuals and undoubtedly the preponderance of working class recruits to teaching has acted as a brake upon the improvement of the status of teaching. Floud



and Scoot (1961) and Altman (1967) reported that there are more working class in teaching now.

As the standing of a profession is to some extent affected by the social status background of its recruits, the higher the social strata from which the recruits generally come, the higher the status of the profession. And naturally the higher the status of a profession the more it will attract from the higher social strata. It is unfortunate that such criteria is used by society at large and as teaching recruits almost anyone, its noble status as a profession is lowered.

On the other hand the medical profession is very selective. They take few chances with the new comers the neophyte is subjected to years



of scrolling and indoctrination by professor and members of the profession. Such control is more than external mechanisms for rewarding the gainful and punishing the deviants. Members of the well established professions are supposed to internalize the standards of their profession – they talk of professional conscience as Hughes (1958) puts it. This is why students entering law, medicine or architecture are intimately unfamiliar with the working ground of practitioners or feels qualified to make judgment about professional performances. But teaching is well known to entrants, and they have already formed opinions about what constitutes an effective teaching performance.



## Teaching and Income

The teachers' unions have fought, a relatively successful campaign for improvements in the pay and conditions of service in the past (Tropp, 1957) and although the economic status of the teachers has been steadily improving, teachers, in general, do not receive salaries comparable to those received within the major professions. Many teachers find it necessary to supplement their salaries by additional employment. The level of teaching salaries is not sufficiently high to maintain men and their families at a living standard associated with professional styles of life in the society.

Thus teachers often involve in a second job like tuition, small holding or shop keeping. In





such situation absentees, lack of punctuality, poor preparation and minimal involvement in classroom activity will be typical.

One factor which perhaps prevents a more rapid increase in the salaries of teachers is that whereas the social functions of the doctor and lawyers are immediate and clear since they are constantly dealing with what are crucial issues for their individual clients, the functions and the responsibilities of the teacher are more diffuse, effective only over a longer time scale, and part of a normal process which is experienced by everyone (Wilson, 1962).

The salary level enjoyed by a profession may be partly a measure of the esteem in which the profession is held in society. It may also be



partly a reflection of the relative scarcity of the skills required in the practice of the profession, and partly a reflection of the power which the organized profession can exercise in its own interest. Unfortunately, teaching has not apparently been able to wield the same degree of power as the organized medical profession.

It is these inter related factors which prevent teaching from acquiring professional status. The economic independence which provides other professions with a basis of professional autonomy is beyond the reach of the teaching service.



## **The Teachers Union**

It is a healthy sign that teachers union in England, USA, Australia and many other developed countries have moved towards the professionalism and other improvement of the professionalization of teachers. On the whole teachers unions are predominantly concerned with the welfare and well-being of their members – the conditions of service, teachers' salaries and so on. Very often they allow themselves to be used as pressure groups by politicians to win consensus in the government of the country. Thus they are forced to involve themselves in unprofessional and political activities in the country. Malaysia is no exception. It is through the teachers unions that many of the national policies of the ruling government are up held.



On the other hand, the affiliation of teacher union to Trade Union Congress (TUC) has weakened its professional stance because in the name of solidarity, teachers have to commit themselves in public affairs such as economic or social crisis of other affiliated trades union organizations. This involvement of teachers' organization in unprofessional endeavours undoubtedly mars the image of teaching as a profession and help to weaken its professional status. The teachers unions have become a body to win consensus for the trade union as a whole, and not a professional body to be consulted on professional matters for national and international benefit. Furthermore there never exist a sole teachers union or Association for teachers in any country. There always exist sub-unions within the unions such as Native Teachers



Union, Taiwan Graduate Teachers Association in Malaysia. High school principal Association, Primary School Head Teachers Association, Science Teachers Association, National Union of Women Teachers Unions and many others, and each claims to represent the interest and welfare of each groups either socially, racially or even religiously. This is a very sensitive and unhealthy divisive element of the teaching profession which is not the practice of other professions such as the Medical or Legal professions. While teachers union tend to defend its 'deviant members', other professions punish them and expel the 'non-conforming members.



## Technical Culture

There is an absence in teaching of a 'technical culture that is a systematic record of the teachers' experiences which can be shared with their colleagues to expectation that individual teachers should record their experiences in such a way that it becomes the general property of the professional groups. Such situation are neither likely to produce a culture by such, specific and detailed technical terms and procedures nor to inculcate norms which operationalize value.

What a retired teacher has learnt is mostly lost and the student teacher must start again with little in case law to guide other than the admonition you shall learn from search and experience. On



the contrary what the physicians have discovered are recorded for the future to improve.

Law, through its elaborate, refined procedures for recording the deliberations and decisions of courts, represents the distillation of generations of practitioners' effort. The success and failures of architect are recorded in stone, wood and steel.

All these experiences have a cumulative quality. It is not possible for the professor of education to join ready access to decades of cases for review and scientific testing nor is it easy for the beginning teachers to get the feeling that they begin where their predecessors left-off. This absence of a refined technical culture is another obstacle for teaching to claim professional status.



## Conclusion

Teaching is a professional dilemma. Today it is generally felt that teachers suffer from a low public image for the reasons that have been discussed above. In addition, teachers often fail to live up to the high, perhaps unrealistically high, expectations which society holds of them. Not only are they criticised for being under qualified birds of passage but also some are unable to live up to the stringent standards of personal and moral conduct set for them. The difficulties facing teachers in their quest for professional status are indeed formidable. If teaching is thought of as the drilling of knowledge into each child and testing by the examination or the monthly test, teachers will never attain professional status.





But if it means providing a variety of stimulating experiences for the child and is concerned always with the individual's social and psychological development so that the child's creativity and sensitivity can be fully developed, then there could exist the conditions for building professional expertise and a professional approach to pedagogy. It is not easy to raise the status of teachers. Without the community on their side, however teachers have no hope of attaining the changes in the organization and approach to education which are required if they are to achieve professional status.

In education, as Cleife (1976) claims, not anyone can be a teacher, not anyone can be placed in a position to exercise the authority expected of a teacher. So some kind of test



of competence and assessment of ability must be made to guarantee that the person is fit for, his position and can make good use of it. If teaching were free for all the schools and other institutions of education would become a jungle of incompetence. The vetting of people is an essential and necessary part of the profession.



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