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Teacher **Profes**

david:

"Professional" is one of the words that has puzzled me for much of my thirty year teaching career, beginning from the time when, as a teacher walking a picket line in Montreal, I was told that "professionals" did not go on strike. It has been used by me and against me in many ways since. As a consultant I was responsible for "developing" people "professionally." As a principal, I exhorted teachers to act as professionals. As a superintendent, I was informed that professionals do not supervise children at recess. Now, as a faculty member in a research university, I struggle to understand the tensions between and within academic and professional faculties. "Professional" seems to be a word with many meanings; indeed, it seems to be in danger of being what Gary Fenstermacher calls a "purr" word, that is, a word that feels good, but whose meaning is uncertain. It often seems to be a synonym for good ("She is a consummate professional"), with its antonym meaning bad ("That is unprofessional behaviour"). Clearly, being a professional is seen as desirable, but it is unclear to me exactly why and what is at stake in achieving professional status.

liz:

"Professional" is a word that often seems to be used as a weapon to stop debate. This was made particularly clear to me during one of my graduate classes when someone raised the topic of teacher professionalism. I was both astounded and angered by the heated conversation that ensued. At the time, the answer for me was a cut-and-dried "of *course* they are" and "I know *I* am" because I identified so personally with the question. It didn't seem so straightforward for some of the others. They pointed to examples of people without formal education who were good teachers and "professional" teachers who were not good teachers. The style of our talk was also a source of frustration. William James once said that "a great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices." We were certainly guilty of that - each of us aired our various opinions about teacher professionalism, but I don't recall a lot of listening. We used the term "professional" to silence the other speakers: "That's a really unprofessional thing to say" or "As a professional, I resent that." None of us really knew what the others meant, but that didn't prevent us from talking at one another. It was a non-dialogue.

sionalism: the Wrong Conversation

By David Coulter and Liz Orme

Our combined experiences demonstrate what we call the professionalism paradox: confusion about what people mean by the term does not seem to prevent them from using it as a verbal weapon to exert power over others. Professional educators working in different institutions – schools, unions, colleges of teachers and universities – battle over ownership of efforts to professionalize teaching. To better grasp this paradox, we have tried to understand the various meanings embedded in professionalism, beginning by looking at the classic sociological study by Magali Larson who explains that

> *professions are occupations with special power and prestige. Society grants these rewards because professionals have special competence in esoteric bodies of knowledge linked to central needs and values of the social system, and because professions are devoted to the service of the public, above and beyond material incentives.*[1]

Central themes concern special knowledge and a duty of service which distinguish professions from other occupations and justify the privilege of self-regulation usually granted professions by society.

Teachers often seem to want to be seen as professionals and acquire the autonomy, status and power that accompanies professionalism. Many of the examples we cited in our opening seem to focus on these attributes. Ironically, the effort to professionalize teaching has often been led by others, beginning with administrators at the beginning of the twentieth century and university teacher educators in the 1980s and 1990s. While service and special knowledge are seen as the two critical attributes for professional status, only the latter has generally been the focus of those concerned with making teaching a profession. Few would argue that teachers provide an important service for society by educating the young, but many seem to doubt the special expertise that teachers require. After all, many people without formal training are gifted teachers.

Teacher educators concerned with professionalizing teaching have generally responded by asserting that teachers possess and use unique forms of knowledge. This has led to an explosion in the teacher knowledge literature; examples of new knowledge categories include strategic, propositional, relational, craft, case, situated, tacit and personal practical. While we cannot examine these various claims to knowledge here,[2] we would like to use a very old typology — familiar to Aristotle — to examine two kinds of knowledge which seem important for teachers: knowing *about* teaching and knowing *how* to teach.

> Even combining knowing **how** to teach with knowing **about** teaching . . . will not necessarily lead to good teaching.

Aristotle called the first form of knowledge *episteme,* that is, knowledge about the world, the kind of knowledge that is now so prized in universities, especially by scientists. Much educational research generates this kind of "scientific" knowledge; examples include the work on effective schools, streaming and tracking, and retention in grade. This knowledge has certainly had huge impact on schooling and especially on the policy directions pursued by governments and school boards. But while such scientific knowledge may be much prized by academics and policy makers, teachers often seem to have a less favorable view: the coupling between *episteme* and practice that is so tight in professions like medicine and engineering is much looser in teaching. If knowing about teaching made someone an excellent teacher, then it would seem reasonable to expect that those who have demonstrated mastery of this kind of knowledge — for example, education professors — would be the best teachers. This is not a proposition that we would care to argue. Indeed, compulsory exposure to knowledge about teaching in teacher education programs does not seem to generate the close relationships between teachers and university faculty as doctors or engineers seem to have with their university representatives.[3]

Often teachers seem to prize a different kind of knowledge — knowing *how to* teach — that is the focus of some "methods" courses in teacher education programs, in the practice teaching experience, and in the "professional development" workshops we have led. This different expertise is a source of some of the friction that surfaces in many debates between university teachers and K-12 teachers, including the non-dialogues about teacher professionalism we described in the opening. Not surprisingly, Aristotle also had a name for this kind of knowledge: *techne*, or knowing how to do something (e.g. a skill, craft or art). Carpenters, chefs and sculptors, for example, use *techne* in creating their artifacts. Clearly, some people who lack the formal knowledge about teaching prized in universities are still very good teachers and *techne* is an attempt to explain the kind of knowledge they demonstrate.

Attempts to **define** teachers as professionals in the same way that doctors or engineers are professionals is **reductionist.**

Ironically, teachers are not always aware that they possess this kind of knowledge; it is often tacit. One of the benefits of working with student teachers, for example, is discovering the knowledge we have acquired about how to attract and maintain the attention of thirty or so high school students that we had not realized that we had gained; *techne* is often most visible in its absence. Fostering this craft knowledge is a major concern for inservice education; as English consultants, we have both been asked to conduct workshops about how to teach novels or how to develop a great poetry unit, as well as how to convert the latest scientific discoveries in reading or brain research (*episteme*) into classroom practice (*techne*). While professional development workshops attempt to foster this kind of knowledge, it is generally acquired in action or practice itself: we learn how to teach largely by actually teaching. Student teachers appreciate this, and the teaching occupation recognizes the importance of *techne* by prizing experience as the currency of credibility.

Again, however, this kind of knowledge may be necessary, but is not sufficient to foster good teaching. People may attend every professional development workshop offered, master the content and faithfully, and repeatedly apply the techniques and methods in their classrooms over years, but still not be good teachers. Even combining knowing how to teach with knowing about teaching by, for example, returning to university for graduate study, will not necessarily lead to good teaching. The mastery of *episteme* or *techne* separately or in combination is not enough because the essence of good teaching is missing. We think Gary Fenstermacher captures this well:

> *As one examines the battles [about the professionalization of teaching] that have occurred in the last few years, an uneasy feeling begins to emerge. It may be best if neither side wins this war, for neither side appears to have a morally grounded sense of the meaning of teaching….The rhetoric of the professionalization of teaching is grounded primarily in the knowledge base of teaching, not the moral base.*[4]

Teaching – and especially educational teaching in K-12 schools – is centrally about the relationships between students and teachers in which teachers agree to share responsibility with parents and the community generally to help children learn the knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions that will help them lead good and worthwhile lives now and in the future. We may disguise this effort behind arcane and complex bureaucratic structures and procedures with policies, contracts, and curricula, but the purpose underneath all of this is still to welcome children into the world so they can join and renew that world. Hannah Arendt captures this powerfully:

> *Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and .. save it from that ruin which, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we … prepare [children] in advance for the task of renewing a common world.*[5]

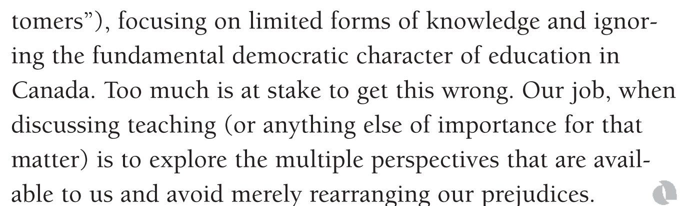
Teaching is fundamentally and critically (in all senses of that word) a moral activity; to teach is to influence the present and future by affecting the lives of particularly vulnerable others – children. Each day, teachers and students make powerful connections with other people as they all attempt to learn what it is to lead good lives. In this endeavor, good teachers make the right decisions in the right circumstances for the right reasons. In this they demonstrate good judgment, which is not a kind of expertise that can be captured by either *episteme* or *techne*. Not surprisingly, Aristotle had a word for this kind of practical wisdom or understanding: *phronesis*, which is both distinct from and related to *episteme* and *techne*.

EN BREF

Malgré une certaine confusion sur son sens, le terme « professionnel » est souvent utilisé comme une arme verbale pour marquer des points ou exercer un pouvoir sur autrui. Les discussions sur le professionnalisme des enseignantes et enseignants ignorent souvent ce qui est le plus important à propos de l'enseignement, soit que c'est une activité morale qui nécessite une combinaison de connaissances et de jugement, qui est distincte, mais qui s'apparente néanmoins aux connaissances précises sur l'enseignement et à la maîtrise du métier. Les tentatives pour définir les enseignantes et enseignants comme des professionnels, au même titre que les médecins et les ingénieurs, méprisent l'importance de la dimension morale- de l'enseignement en mettant l'accent sur des formes limitées de connaissances.

We see this kind of judgment routinely in the actions of good teachers: the kindergarten teachers who welcome children into the world of the school; the elementary teachers who help their students gain the tools to access human culture and simultaneously help children to live that culture by treating one another with kindness and respect; the high school teachers who both deepen children's understanding of the human condition by initiating their students into the particular traditions or "subjects" that humans have developed to understand their experience and who attempt to model living a good life. Ironically, fostering *phronesis* in contemporary democratic multicultural Canadian society is far more complex than it was in an ancient Greek city state, yet the need for good judgment is even greater.

Our problem with much of the discussion about teacher professionalism is that it ignores what is most important about teaching. We have been having the wrong conversation. Debating whether or not teachers are professionals is educationally, at best, a waste of time, especially if all that it is going to ensue is the "yes, they are/no, they aren't" kind of non-dialogue that we described in our opening. Indeed, attempts to define teachers as professionals in the same way that doctors or engineers are professionals is reductionst because such undertakings generally distort the moral dimensions of teaching by using the wrong language (e.g., "clients" and "customers"), focusing on limited forms of knowledge and ignoring the fundamental democratic character of education in Canada. Too much is at stake to get this wrong. Our job, when discussing teaching (or anything else of importance for that matter) is to explore the multiple perspectives that are available to us and avoid merely rearranging our prejudices.



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3 L. Cuban, "Managing Dilemmas While Building Professional Communities," *Educational Researcher* 21, no.1 (1992): 4-11.

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5 H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Press, 1968), 196.

David Coulter is an assistant professor of educational studies at The University of British Columbia. david.coulter@ubc.ca

Liz Orme is a curriculum coordinator for Coquitlam School District #43 in British Columbia. lorme@schdist43.bc.ca

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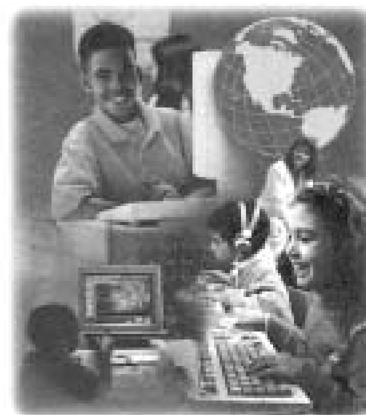

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