

What is a profession?



Part 1

Depending upon the context in which you use the terms profession and professional, the meaning can change and therefore impact on the credence behind the statement in question. 'Profession' and 'professional' will mean different things to different people, Fox (1992, pg 2 as cited Evans, 2008) suggested that 'without the language police... it is unlikely that the term professional(ism) will be used in only one concrete way.' In a society which is constantly changing, so may the parameters of such definitions and titles. Professionalism is a 'shifting phenomenon, whatever people think it is at any particular time' (Hanlon, 1998 cited in Whitty, 2006), trying to distinguish if a particular occupation is a so called profession or an individual is a professional is difficult. With no guidelines on the broad subject of professionalism and as previously identified people's perceptions ultimately decide whether or not professional status is suitable, profession and professional are ultimately labels. One may tend to label particular occupations depending on their experiences; the professional label can assume connotations of improved pay, better quality of work, enhanced standards and higher social class.

The Oxford dictionary 2014 edition's definition of profession is 'a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification'. This definition could suggest occupations such as car mechanics or hairdressing as professions. These occupations can be trained on the job or at college and they can be certified therefore gaining a formal qualification, mechanics and hairdressers provide a paid service for members of the public. The Oxford dictionary has provided a broad definition

that does not refer to specific occupations they deem as professions; but through further reading there are have been some frequently mentioned characteristics of an occupation that should be considered when bearing in mind the term ' profession'. Millerson (1964, cited in Whitty, 2006) elaborated and stated that a profession entailed;

' the use of skills based on theoretical knowledge; education and training in those skills certified by examination; a code of professional conduct oriented towards the ' public good'; and a powerful professional organisation.'

A ' typical profession' such as a lawyer or doctor are occupations that are held in high esteem within society and they have a high level of responsibility and accountability and are registered with professional body. Members are expected to continually develop their skills and reflect on their practices as opposed to previously mentioned, mechanics and hairdressers who do not have a professional body, a code of ethics, individuals do not need checks into their background so can therefore have criminal record whilst serving the public. All of which constitute less of a professional status and more of just a paid occupation.

Professional regulatory bodies are independent, they scrutinise the services provided by their members considering the best interests of the public. They have a specific code of conduct and ethics and individuals entering the profession must prove to have high moral values and an ability to perform the task expected of them. Registered professional bodies independent of government for example are General Teaching Council, General Medical Council, General Dental Council and The Law Society. Being a member of a

professional body means people should endeavour to continually refine and develop their skills through becoming a reflective practitioner and adhering to a code of ethics. Members of a profession registered to a professional body should have an impartial approach, be open to change and be 'prime agents in that change process' (Donaldson, 2010).

When considering the term 'professional' Pellegrino (1983) stated that;

'professionals are groups who, because of the special nature of their activities, "profess" themselves dedicated to moral standards that oblige them to place the good of those they serve above their own interest.'

Taking Pellegrino's definition into account, anyone from a nail technician to a farmer could be considered as professional although Klass (1961) and Hughes (1961) identified that a professional is traditionally university educated. However, when we speak of people within any given occupation, university educated or not you may consider the individual being unprofessional for a reason such as being late or dressed inappropriately. The belief that someone within any occupation can be unprofessional even though you may not link them to being in a profession highlights the complexity of the subject of professionalism.

Many tend to suit their interpretations at a particular time, based on their personal experience to suit the context in which they use the term professional. Professions, to many can be seen as a form of exclusivity and elitism. A government report in 2012, identified how closing the social gap 'across the professions as a whole' is important.

‘ Tomorrow’s professional is growing up in a family richer than seven in ten of all families in the UK. The consequence was that too many able children from average income and middle class families – let alone low-income families – were losing out in the race for professional jobs’

Allowing people from all social backgrounds a fair opportunity to enter a profession could be key to developing a clear understanding of a profession. The report recommended that primary schools have a key role in nurturing the professions, educating children, promoting accessibility and fairness regardless of social background with regards to having a profession.

Thinking about whether a teaching is a profession has been open to considerable debate. Looking at teaching in a more specific sense and context needs to be considered here. Carr (2003, pg19) stresses that teaching is not necessarily educationally based, anyone can teach, whether teach a child to play football or teach an adult to play guitar. There have been many great teachers; Jesus, Ghandi and Buddah to name but a few, but viewing this as their occupation moreover a profession would not be likely. Teaching as an occupation requires skill but without applying pedagogy remains to be seen whether this person is a professional teacher.

Teaching, as with profession and professional are words that label and attain to preconceptions and perception of an individual. Educational teaching can be viewed as profession but as discussed previously, with little to distinguish between a profession and not a profession; is down to perception and pre conceived ideas. People usually enhance or decrease their ideals depending on an experience. For example; a parent’s perception of a teacher out-with

school, seen drinking alcohol and socialising in a nightclub maybe see to be unprofessional. Albeit the teacher has been school all week, ten hours per day showing dedication and commitment as an educator. Obviously not a fair judgement made by the parent but something a potential teacher must take into consideration. Teaching can be viewed as less of a profession than for example a doctor as parents have all been through the educational process, having attended school, they all believe they know about education and schooling therefore impacting on their perception of the profession as a whole.

‘ Teachers are not clones’ (McBer, 2000, pg 12), they are expected to be autonomous and have the ability to use their personal intuition; professional judgement; and high moral regard to enable and ensue the ability to reflect on their practices with the intention to improve themselves for the benefits of others. (McBer (2000), Dewey (1933) and Zeichner (1981-2)). More than any other occupation are these qualities and skills are required. Not only is this a requirement of a profession in general but also an expectation of those you are providing a service for. In saying this, ‘ autonomy seems to be emerging as a key variable when examining educational reform initiatives, with some arguing that granting autonomy and empowering teachers is an appropriate place to begin in solving the problems of today’s schools’ (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994 cited in Pearson & Moomaw 2005), one of the problems being teacher professionalism.

‘ De-skilling’ in teaching has created a lack of respect for the profession. Whitty (2001) mentions about the ‘ fragmentation’ of the profession. He believes that with more parent and pupil choice and decreased autonomy of

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teachers and schools mean they are not held in as high regard as years before. New, modern practices of school led teacher training, where attendance at university is not a necessity has changed the way teachers qualify for the job; ultimately impacting on how the profession is viewed. As there is no formal education process like you would expect when thinking about a teacher, here the risk of 'de-professionalising' teaching is prominent even though this route. This is extremely worrying and jeopardising the status of teaching and opening doors to many that may not be considered suitable for teaching if applying through the standard university route of teacher education. It is unfortunate and frustrating for those in the profession that people view teaching in a less formal way than it has been regarded historically.

Part 2.

I believe that through developing my understanding of professionalism, I have ensued clarity to the skills I have, and also those I need to develop in order to become a teacher. A quality teacher will endeavour to continually develop their skills, through reflection, engaging actively in continual professional development and upholding strong standards within and out-with the school environment. I particularly believe that becoming a teacher, is a lifestyle that must be adopted. Teaching and professionalism marry together, expectation from others and that of ourselves, as teachers, should be high. Hyland (2007) stated that 'professionalism involves behaving in a principled way towards clients. Clients include not only children but parents and society as a whole.' Society depend on excellent teachers as children are modelling their behaviour on those around them and learning to become

quality members of society, most see their parents and teachers as role models.

In relation to research done by Hattie (2009), he concluded that “ the current mantra, that teachers make the difference, is misleading...not all teachers have powerful effects on students.” Hattie concluded that a strong, positive student – teacher relationship is critical, teachers who create this are more likely to have better effects on achievement. I believe this strong relationship not only impacts on children’s learning but also creates a positive learning environment for children of all abilities within and out-with the school. I also believe that parent participation within the school community should be encouraged, many parents have skills that could attribute to creating a positive community within the school solidifying the importance of building strong positive relationships.

The GTC professional code of conduct states;

‘ The capacity of the teacher should be built not just through extensive ‘ teaching practice’ but through reflecting on and learning from the experience of supporting children’s learning with all the complexities which characterise twenty-first century childhood.

The GTC encourage teachers who ‘ believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning.’ This statement is one that I hold in high regard and, my hope is that one day I can have a positive impact on children, be a key person in aiding their learning and development, shaping their future and therefore impacting on the

professionals of the future. Using the GTC code of conduct strengthens my belief on the importance of teaching as a profession.

It has been suggested that the only feature that ever really distinguished the professions from other occupations was the “ professional” label itself. (Runté, 1995). Nevertheless, in reference to the Milburn (2012) report, referred to in part one, viewed education in primary school as key to opening the social barriers of entering a profession. With this in mind, teachers are key players in the process of educating and aiding the development of children and ‘ unlocking the potential of the rest of society’ with a view to many of them progressing through the education system and being ‘ future members of’ a profession one day. (DfES 2001a p. 2) Considering this, regarding teaching as a profession itself is well justified. Perhaps once these factors are realised and achieved, people will not find the reasons to question teaching as a profession.

Word count 1988

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