

Essays in Education

Volume 18

Article 15

Fall 9-1-2006

An Uncertain Position: Examining the Status of Teaching as a Profession

Kevin C. Robb
Upper Iowa University

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS!

Essays in Education (EIE) is a professional, peer-reviewed journal intended to promote practitioner and academic dialogue on current and relevant issues across human services professions. The editors of *EIE* encourage both novice and experienced educators to submit manuscripts that share their thoughts and insights. Visit <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie> for more information on submitting your manuscript for possible publication.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robb, Kevin C. (2006) "An Uncertain Position: Examining the Status of Teaching as a Profession," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 18 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol18/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Essays in Education* by an authorized editor of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.

An Uncertain Position: Examining the Status of Teaching as a Profession

Kevin C. Robb
Upper Iowa University

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the characteristics of a full profession, to review how many and which characteristics cannot be ascribed to teaching, and how this situation has come to be. The affect of gender and social class on the perception of teaching as a profession is discussed. Although, teaching still has an ambiguous status as a profession, discussing it will allow people to continue to talk, think and write about this issue. Teaching will probably never be considered a full profession because it does not involve all the characteristics of a profession.

An Uncertain Position: Examining the Status of Teaching as a Profession

Until the twentieth century, teachers had very little formal preparation for their jobs and little voice in determining the conditions of their employment. Teacher training entailed only one or two years (and sometimes less) at a normal school or teacher's college. The main thrust of this training centered on their public and private deportment. Teachers were enjoined to follow strict rules and regulations concerning their behavior away from the school setting (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Teachers' unions were nonexistent, and teachers were isolated from one another in small schools and school districts. Teachers could be dismissed by a board of education for almost any reason with no recourse (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Further, teachers were not allowed to teach any material that anyone in the community might find questionable (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

Times have changed. Today teachers aspire to be seen as true professionals with expert knowledge concerning the content and methods of instruction in their particular areas of study. Despite some gains, teaching retains an uncertain status in our society. Although it is often referred to as a profession, it does not command the same prestige as other established professions, such as law or medicine.

What are the characteristics of a full profession and how and which characteristics can we ascribe to teaching? In that not all these characteristics can be ascribed to teaching, the question then becomes—how has this uncertain position of teaching as a profession come to be? What impact has government and business had on teaching as a profession in America? How has gender and social class affected the perception of teaching as a profession? What have teachers done to improve their status as a profession?

The purpose of this paper is to answer the questions above via several sections. The first section will identify the characteristics of professions and discuss how teaching lags behind other professions. The second section will provide an inquiry into the impact government and business has had on teaching as a profession in America. The third section will assess the effect gender and social class has had on the perception of teaching as a profession. This will be followed by a conclusion to make recommendations for future direction. All of the above issues have been and may continue to be of great concern to educators in America.

Characteristics of Professions

Ornstein and Levine (2003) identify ten characteristics of a full profession based on the works of Corwin (1965), Howsam (1976), and Rosenholtz (1989):

1. A sense of public service; a lifetime commitment to career.
2. A defined body of knowledge and skills beyond that grasped by laypersons.
3. A lengthy period of specialized training.
4. Control over licensing standards and/or entry requirements.
5. Autonomy in making decisions about selected spheres of work.
6. An acceptance of responsibility for judgments made and acts performed related to services rendered; a set of standards of performance.
7. A self-governing organization composed of members of the profession.
8. Professional associations and/or elite groups to provide recognition for individual achievements.
9. A code of ethics to help clarify ambiguous matters or doubtful points related to services rendered.
10. High prestige and economic standing. (p. 30)

Because not all of these characteristics apply to teaching, the inevitable conclusion is that teaching is not, in the fullest sense of the word, a profession. Etzioni (1969) views teaching, nursing, and social work as “semiprofessions” or as “emerging professions” that are in the process of achieving these characteristics.

The teaching profession lags behind the professions of law and medicine in four significant areas. It does not possess: 1) “a defined body of knowledge and skills beyond that grasped by laypersons, 2) control over licensing standards and/or entry requirements, 3) autonomy in making decisions about selected spheres of work, and 4) high prestige and economic standing” (Ornstein & Levine, 2003, p. 30). In what follows, each of these areas will be examined in more depth.

Defined Body of Knowledge and Skills

All professions possess a monopoly on certain kind of knowledge that are distinct to them, separates their members from the general public, and allows its members to exercise control over the profession (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Also, Ornstein and Levine (2003) state, “By mastering this defined body of knowledge, members of the profession establish their expertise, and by denying membership to those who have not mastered it, they protect the public

from quacks and untrained amateurs” (p. 30). Unfortunately, there has never been an agreed-upon specialized body of knowledge that is unique to education or teaching. Teaching has never been guided by general rules of procedure and established methodologies found in such professions as the physical and health sciences (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Consequently, many people, particularly the lay public, discuss issues in education as if they were experts, a situation that leads to a great deal of conflict and adversarial conversations (Gideonse, 1989; Rowan, 1994; Saphier, 1995). Because everyone has gone to school, most think they know something about teaching and learning contrary to law and medicine. This situation does matter.

Control Over Licensing Standards and/or Entry Requirements

Another consequence of having no defined body of knowledge is that the content of pre-service education courses varies from state to state and from institution to institution. Teacher preparation programs consist of three major components: 1) liberal or general education, 2) specialized subject matter—the student’s major or minor, and 3) core professional education courses (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Most agree that the preparation of good teachers requires these three components. However, there are strong disagreements on the emphasis that each component should receive. The questions pertain to how much time a student should spend on liberal education versus specific subject matter and professional education courses. Also, there are differing views on the extent of practical experience, which stresses practice teaching in school settings.

Koerner (1963) argued that by requiring a large number of education courses and by making these courses “soft” (relatively undemanding in terms of rigor), departments of education produced teachers familiar with pedagogy at the expense of academic content. This controversy continues even though some critics have helped reduce the number of required education courses and increased academic discipline (Boyd, 1994). The result is increased specific coursework requirements, making it difficult to establish clear national standards for teacher preparation.

This situation is gradually changing. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2001) “has set standards that specify the types of courses to be taken and the qualifications of the faculty who teach those courses” (p. 4). Some teacher-education institutions still have not met NCATE’s standards; as of 2001 fifty-seven percent of the 1,200 colleges teaching pre-service educators were not accredited by NCATE (NCATE, 2001). Most NCATE members have worked to meet NCATE standards, and many had obtained NCATE approval by 2001 (NCATE, 2001). In 1995, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) decided to promote the pursuit of NCATE accreditation (NCATE, 1998). To continue its effort, the AACTE is providing assistance, such as consultants to non-accredited institutions, during the process for accreditation (NCATE, 1998). If all of these efforts lead to teaching being perceived as a profession, then it may be worth the time and effort put forth by these groups and the individuals associated with them. If it does not help lead to that end, then questions might be raised as to whether the efforts were worth it.

Historically, teaching has not had a uniform requirement for entry and licensing that is normally found with most professions (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Recently, there has been a reform movement that has required prospective teachers in most states to pass competency tests

at a minimum standard. Also, the *National Board for Professional Teaching Standards* has established methods for measuring a person's ability to teach. As with other situations related to education, certification requirements vary greatly from state to state, and the practice of testing pre-service and practicing teachers has generated ongoing controversy (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

The success for this reform is, however, threatened by the trend toward alternative certification. This is a process whereby college graduates are recruited from business, industry, and military as well as experienced people seeking second careers. Although intended to eliminate teacher shortages in the areas of mathematics, science, and computer instruction, it is also seen as a way to improve the quality of new teachers. Alternative certification is applauded as an innovative and practical approach by some in the general public and by school board members. A majority of teacher organizations, however, see alternative teacher certification as a real threat to the profession. As Shulman (1987) noted, "The assumption that those who know something can automatically teach... [will] not solve the problem of teacher quality" (p. 324).

Unfortunately, whatever opinion they may have about differing requirements for certification, teachers historically have had little to say about these matters (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Recently, in some states, teacher organizations are beginning to work with state legislatures and departments of education to modify certification standards and establish professional practice boards (Buck, Polloway, & Robb, 1995).

Autonomous Decision-Making

In a true profession, every member of the group is considered to be qualified to make professional judgments on the nature of the work involved. Subsequently, if a layperson tried to take control of the profession he/she would be considered a natural enemy of the profession. It would be interpreted as outside interference in an attempt to limit the power of the professional. Professionals develop customs and establish rules that give them jurisdiction over their area of expertise and their relationships with their clients (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

In contrast, teachers have traditionally had very little input into curriculum decisions, and they worry when they seek to introduce textbooks or discuss topics considered controversial by vocal groups. It is a fact that school officials often hire outside "experts" with little or no teaching experience to help them select books, write grants, or resolve local school-community issues (Apple, 1990). As is evident more than ever in our country on issues related to school reform, the initiative often comes from our own government officials, business leaders, and civic groups rather than from teachers (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that includes the mandate for use of evidence-based practice is an example of this type of reform (Berlak, 2005). Associated with school reform efforts, many districts in numerous states have dictated methods to be used in the planning and delivering of instruction. Also, this has led to teachers being evaluated, in large part, by their ability to follow these standards based methods. Ornstein and Levine (2003) emphasize this point:

In Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas, to take three examples, guidelines for teacher assessment have specified the general instructional sequence—for instance, introduce the topic, present material, check for understanding, provide guided and independent practice, and discuss homework—that teachers should follow in executing a “model” lesson. (p. 33)

The evaluation protocols enforce a very specific form of technical rationality, making it less possible for teachers to innovate or make decisions about their own teaching (D. Gallagher, personal communication, April 21, 2006).

McNeil (1986) concluded that legislation requirements for extensive standardized testing of students, combined with administrative prescriptions of appropriate teaching methods, have helped to develop “deprofessionalization” and “deskilling” of teachers. Deprofessionalization happens when policies require teachers to simplify (or technify) curriculum and instructional methods in order to make certain that students try to demonstrate mastery on standardized tests (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). McNeil (1986) and Rothman (1995) have reported that teachers respond with “defensive teaching,” in which the curriculum is fragmented to fit tests, topics are “mystified” by stressing factual regurgitation over comprehension, and material is watered down in order to gain student compliance.

There are similar negative consequences attendant to specifying instructional methods with regard to teacher evaluation. Tyler-Bernstein (1987) described evaluative approaches that reward teachers who “lecture and question a relatively passive class but not teachers who help students struggle through difficult tasks—such as science experiments, English composition, or computer programming—on their own” (p. 29). In fact, teachers who attempt the latter are penalized. Other researchers have described cases in which prescription of specific teaching methods has led to teachers who emphasize passive learning and memorization of basic knowledge concepts (Wise, 1988; Levine & Levine 1996; Smyth, Shacklock, & Hattam 1997).

Collective bargaining has brought about different arrangements between teacher unions and school administration, but many lay people still insist that teachers are public servants and are accountable to the board of education and the school administrators who are elected and hired by the people (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). Because they foot the bill and provide the students as clients, the public believes, they should be involved in a large share of the decision making process. This leads to many situations wherein teachers can be directed to do whatever parents, principals, superintendents, and school board members want, even when these directives conflict with the teachers’ professional judgments. As true professionals, teachers must be more assertive and resistant, and if need be, argue for their beliefs, the integrity of their professional judgments, and continue to bargain for more power.

High Prestige and Economic Standing

Occupational prestige refers to an occupation’s esteem and how it is viewed in a particular society (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). True professions, because they are seen as making a valuable contribution to society, rate high in prestige. Occupations tend to be prestigious if they require a high level of education or skill and involve little physical or manual labor.

Surprisingly, elementary and secondary teachers have historically ranked fairly high on these aspects of social status.

In a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of more than 500 occupations, physicians and surgeons received the highest average score of 82 (Treiman, 1977). Elementary and secondary teachers scored 60 and 63 respectively, both of which were above the 90th percentile (Treiman, 1977). There are studies that claim 70 percent of U.S. respondents are of the opinion that high school teachers are “very respected” or “fairly respected” (Ornstein and Levine, 2003). One could clearly argue whether or not teachers feel respected in today’s society. While teachers may be respected by some of the public, those with political power may not respect the teaching profession. How might we reconcile or explain this ambiguity? The relatively high ranking of teachers may be due to the public gratitude for the “nobility” of their work with youngsters, but that gratitude may not be equated with the same kind of prestige enjoyed by law, medicine, and the like. This is due to the fact that law and medicine are judged to be professions with a high degree of status.

That teachers have increased their level of education over the past half century might be one reason why teachers have increased their occupational prestige. The complex nature of teaching might be another reason. Rowan (1994), comparing teachers’ work with other occupations, found that complexity of work was directly related to occupational prestige. Teaching ranked high in prestige, because it was more complex than 75 percent of all other occupations (Rowan, 1994). A teachers’ work requires them to apply logical principles or scientific analyses to define problems, collect data, establish facts, and draw conclusions (Rowan, 1994). Teachers must possess highly developed skills related to reading, writing, and speaking. Most importantly, teachers must develop positive relationships with many different constituencies—children, adolescents, parents, colleagues, and superiors. Professions such as physicians, lawyers, and engineers are regarded as more complex, and because these professions require more rigorous academic preparation and licensure, society confers higher prestige and higher pay to them (Rowan, 1994).

Even though teachers’ salaries have increased more than those of the average worker in industry, teacher pay is lower than the average college graduate, such as those in engineering, nursing, accounting, or business/finance (NEA Today, 1995). Thus teachers earn far less than lawyers, business executives, and other professionals with similar levels of higher education. For example, despite a similar level of higher education as that of a teacher, a business executive might earn an annual salary between \$150,000 and \$500,000. The status-consistency hypothesis states that a group will compare its achievements, both in terms of prestige and salary, with other groups, trying to receive the rewards of people with similar occupations and similar years of education (Corwin, 1970). There is no reason to think that teachers will not continue to make comparisons with other groups and, therefore, feel dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction has led some teachers to leave the profession and has been one of the reasons for teacher militancy towards public officials and a crucial factor in the union movement (Natale, 1993).

The educational reform movement will continue to put teachers in the limelight and pressure school districts to increase salaries. As is apparent from recent past history, few optimistic projections and promises have been fulfilled (Ornstein, 1990). The earnings gap

between teachers and other highly educated professional groups must continue to close if teaching is to realize full status as a profession. Teachers should continue to experience increased status with the help from their own professional organizations as well as continued improvement of educational standards (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

The teaching profession lags behind other professions such as law and medicine in four significant areas. One is having a defined body of knowledge and skills. The second is control over licensing standards and/or entry requirements. The third is autonomy in making decisions about selected spheres of work. The fourth is high prestige and economic standing. That teaching does not possess these four characteristics is a factor pertaining to why teaching has such an ambiguous status as a profession. The relationship between government and business on teaching as a profession is the next area of discussion.

The Impact of Government and Business on Teaching as a Profession

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the common school movement played a significant role in American education, because it developed support for elementary education that was financed by public monies. This was the first time when government and business came together in dealing with educational issues. The common school offered a basic curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic. It received its name “common” school; because it was open to children of all social and economic classes.

The common schools paved the way for the American public school system. Late in the nineteenth century, the public high school completed the developmental plan that would prepare students to enter institutions of higher learning. Horace Mann was the most prominent American educator involved in the common school movement. Mann used his political clout to mobilize support for public education (Messerli, 1972). He gained taxpayer and business support for public education by convincing these constituencies that it was in their best interest to provide this support (Messerli, 1972). He used the stewardship theory to persuade wealthy people that they had a responsibility in providing public education, because they were stewards of wealth (Messerli, 1972).

Mann argued that public education would create industrious men and women who would obey the law, be diligent in their work, respect America’s new democratic way of life, and add to the economy (Messerli, 1972). Thus, tax support was an investment that would yield high dividends in the form of progress, prosperity, and public safety (Messerli, 1972). Mann believed the tax supported school would enable children from lower socioeconomic classes to gain knowledge and skills required to become productive citizens and act as a social equalizer (Messerli, 1972). He thought capitalist economic development had the potential to improve every American’s standard of living (DeYoung, 1989). Also, Mann believed that the development of human resources for both national growth and social/economic equality should not be left to chance; these objectives required a mass public education system. Mann’s point is emphasized in Filler (1965):

The arts of civilization have so multiplied the harvests of the earth, that a general famine will not again lend its aid to free the community of its surplus members. Society at large

has emerged from the barbarian and semi-barbarian state where pestilence formerly had its birth, and committed its ravages. These great outlets and sluice-ways, which, in former times, relieved nations of the dregs and refuse of the population, being now closed, whatever want or crime we engender, or suffer to exist, we must live with. Whatever children, then, we suffer to grow up amongst us, we must live with as men; and our children must be their contemporaries...[therefore] in a government like ours, each individual must think of the welfare of the State, as well as of the welfare of his own family, and therefore, of the children of others as well as his own. (p. 90-91)

Mann believed in the relationship between public schooling and a democratic society. Also, he thought literacy was necessary for citizens to participate intelligently in the process of representative government. Like others, such as Noah Webster, Mann believed a true American identity could be created with a public education system (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). If a sense of identity and a common culture was to be promoted, the country needed a common elementary education system.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the American public was in favor of formal schooling because they believed it could be instrumental in national development (DeYoung, 1989). The economic development at this time in America centered on the transformation from a rural and small business economy into one of large manufacturing concerns in major cities of industry. The common school supporters believed that new citizens in the cities, mainly immigrants and former rural people, needed moral and character education (DeYoung, 1989). This point is emphasized by DeYoung (1989): “the civilizing effect of public schooling and character training was vitally necessary for a host of children upon whom future economic development would most assuredly depend” (p. 41-42). There was a belief at the time that the role of the public school ought to be further expanded and that the cause of public education was synonymous with the cause of economic growth.

The high school became a dominant institution of secondary education in America during the later half of the nineteenth century. Because of court cases in the 1870s, which allowed people of the states to establish schools and support them with tax funds, the high school movement grew rapidly (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). By 1890, public high schools in America were enrolling a large number of students. Compulsory school attendance laws were passed, and as a result, public secondary schools became an obligation of states. In addition, states had the right to set minimum standards for all schools.

The increase in the number of high schools was also the result of numerous socioeconomic factors. America experienced a major change, moving from an agricultural and rural society to an industrial and urban nation. More than 25 percent of all Americans, by the early 1930s, lived in seven urban areas: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Cleveland (Krug, 1972). Because of the rapid growth of urban areas, there was a need for more specialized jobs, professions, and services; American high schools responded by developing curricula that would meet the needs of the changing economic landscape (Krug, 1972).

The end of the nineteenth century brought about a new and different perspective related to continued economic growth and to issues in public education. There were conflicting arguments among taxpayers in cities regarding how much, if any, they should pay for secondary schools (DeYoung, 1989). This point is emphasized by DeYoung (1989) who states: “The more reluctant of these citizens typically resisted notions that they should write a blank check for schools in which they had no children; they could not understand how they or the rest of the public would benefit from them” (p. 66).

The continued opposition by labor groups, public teachers and the general public successfully resisted efforts by business leaders to turn most secondary schools into specialized centers for job training (DeYoung, 1989). The supporters of this concept emphasized the potential for using such programs as a way to develop community building, something that is still discussed and practiced in public schools today.

The call for more and better scientific understanding and the application of science to help meet the needs of business were heard during this period of time in America (DeYoung, 1989). The curricular patterns in high schools during the 1920s consisted of four different types: 1) the college preparatory program, which consisted of English language and literature, foreign languages, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, and history and social studies; 2) commercial or business program, with courses in bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing; 3) industrial, vocational, home economics, and agricultural programs; and 4) a general academic program for students whose formal education would end with graduation (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

The increasing demand for secondary education seemed to come from several economic and social factors. One was the perceived importance of higher education for the emerging middle class (DeYoung, 1989). The middle class saw this as a way to improve their social status. Also, this appealed to parents of the working class who had aspirations of social advancement for their children. Another factor was the concern educators and business leaders had for girls in schools. It was believed they needed to have some consumer skills in order to live in the modern world (DeYoung, 1989). Because of the relationship between formal schooling and emerging occupations, domestic skills required to run a household in the new century also needed to be taught in public schools (DeYoung, 1989). This was referred to as home economics, what is now known as family and consumer sciences. Schools had been convinced to take on the task of producing specific types of workers for the national economy as well as consumers for the products that were produced in America’s factories (DeYoung, 1989).

In the past, in America, there have been numerous attempts to redefine the high school’s purpose and curriculum. One of the major events from America’s past occurred in 1957, when, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union successfully orbited a space satellite called Sputnik. Public school critics, many from government and business, took the opportunity to explain the failure of America in the space race on American students deficient in math and science (DeYoung, 1989). In 1958, Congress responded by passing the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which funded areas considered to be critical to national defense, to improve math, science, and foreign languages curricula and instruction (DeYoung, 1989). This illustrates how public schools are affected by external forces—specifically those of business and government.

It would be unfair to suggest that all efforts to alter educational policy in America have come from economic development concerns; it is also the case that many in the education field have been ready and willing to accept school reform consistent with the needs of the government and business sector (DeYoung, 1989). Unfortunately, many business leaders, social scientists, and economists have suggested that America's economic development is related to social progress (DeYoung, 1989). Equally unfortunate is the fact that public schools have been declared an important basis for both. It is this author's belief that schools should be a place of learning (about oneself and how to help society) and not a place for developing the next generation of workers and consumers.

During the past 150 years, school reform efforts have been associated with perceived national American crises (DeYoung, 1989). At the present time, we may be in the middle of another perceived crisis, one in which proposals for dramatic school reform efforts are present. NCLB appears to be the dominating factor in present day school reform. For many, it may be difficult to argue with the rhetoric associated with this piece of legislation. The title sounds so positive and promising that one would not dare disagree with the idea it portrays.

The call for this school reform policy is associated with arguments that the economic development needs of America require a well-educated population and that the crisis of today is that educators, mainly teachers, have let America down in terms of academic standards (DeYoung, 1989). "Put another way, proposals for improving education today operate under the assumption that developing better human resources for economic development ought to be the primary criterion by which educational excellence is defined" (DeYoung, 1989, p. 106). Excellent schools are ones in which learner outcomes are consistent with the economic needs of the nation and can be observed and measured (DeYoung, 1989). All of this sounds very much like what is happening today in our public schools.

For the past 200 years in America, those associated with the government and business leaders have been working together to develop a capitalistic economy and to make the U.S. the leading economic force in the world (DeYoung, 1989). Public schools (and their teachers) were never seen as an equal partner in this process. They were a means to the end. When problems with the economy appeared, schools were an easy scapegoat for the government and business to blame. Purpel (1993) emphasizes this point when he states, "we cannot afford to continue a policy of letting the public off the hook, a policy that keeps the profession as a scapegoat" (p.285). Originally, schools were used to develop the moral and character education of the children of immigrants and rural peoples who moved to the cities (DeYoung, 1989). Next, they were used to help develop workers for the factories and consumers of the goods produced in those factories (DeYoung, 1989). Then schools were used to help solve the problem of national defense. Public schools have been blamed for the social and economic problems of America, but the truth of the matter is, public schools have helped solve the problems presented to the American people by the government and business leaders in the name of capitalism (DeYoung, 1989).

The impact of government and business on teaching as a profession is another factor as to why teaching has an ambiguous status as a profession. The effect of gender and social class on teaching as a profession is the next area of discussion.

The Effect of Gender and Social Class on Teaching as a Profession

Just as there is a relationship between gender and social class on school achievement, strong relationships also exist between family socioeconomic background and educational and occupational attainment decisions of students. There are four main variables used to classify Americans and their families—occupation, education, income, and housing value—into five social groups: upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, upper lower class, and lower class (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). To be considered in one of the higher classes, one must be high in occupational prestige, amount of education, income, and housing value. People in this class are identified as being high in socioeconomic status (SES); they are seen by others as upper-class and are influential and powerful in their communities. Those people lower in socioeconomic status are viewed as having low levels of power and prestige.

Apple (1986) makes a point that teachers are classed as well as gendered. “In every occupational category,” he asserts, “women are more apt to be proletarianized (the class of wage-earning workers in society) than men” (p. 33). This factor is possibly due to sexist practices of promotion and recruitment and is related to the conditions under which women have worked, the way money has been historically controlled by men, and the historical relationship between teaching and domestic work (Apple, 1986). “Whatever the reason, it is clear that a given position may be more or less proletarianized, depending on its relationship to the sexual division of labor” (Apple, 1986, p. 33). This is not a positive situation for teachers, a majority of whom are female, in America’s public schools.

Over 90 percent of women’s paid positions in America consist of four basic categories: 1) employment in “peripheral” manufacturing industries and retail trades and considerably none in the expanding but low-paid service sector of the economy; 2) clerical work; 3) health and education; and 4) domestic service. Apple (1986) makes the point that a majority of women are paid at the lowest positions or at the bottom of the middle pay levels if there has been some mobility (as cited in Holland, 1980). There is and has been discrimination against women in the job market, and it does not appear to be ending any time soon (Apple, 1986).

The teaching profession in America has produced a similar pattern. After the many years of trials and tribulations for teachers, there has been very little change. A majority of school teachers, particularly at the primary and elementary grades, are women, while many more men are principals of those same schools (Apple, 1986). Almost 90 percent of elementary teachers in America today are women, and they only account for approximately 20 percent of all principals (Apple, 1986). It is difficult to separate this pattern from the historical past of class and patriarchal control found elsewhere in our culture.

Those in power of public schools have tried to control the work of the teachers using various methods. According to Berlak (2005), trying to control academic knowledge and the curriculum has taken place in the recent past and has certainly intensified as a result of the

NCLB legislation (as cited in Shapiro & Purpel, 2005). Berlak (2005) makes a point that individual states and the federal government have both played a role in sponsoring changes in curricular and teaching practices associated with the deskilling of teachers (as cited in Shapiro & Purpel, 2005). Also, Berlak (2005) believes the federal and state government is prepared to use its bureaucratic power to force compliance to its mandates for NCLB (as cited in Shapiro & Purpel, 2005).

Intensification is another method used to try to control the work of teachers. Intensification is a way of eroding the work privileges of educational workers (Apple, 1986). It ranges from trivial to more complex practices—such as not allowing time to go to the bathroom to not being allowed to attend professional conferences (Apple, 1986). Intensification is visible from the practice of more work responsibilities for the same salary (Apple, 1986). It can destroy the social setting of workers and, in turn, lead to more isolation (Apple, 1986). Isolation is one of the characteristics that has been placed on teachers from those in power for a long time.

Teachers have been forced to rely on experts to develop curricular and teaching goals and procedures. This has led to teachers having to develop a wider range of technical skills. “Teacher skills,” such as grading exams, quizzes, and worksheets quickly have to be mastered by teachers (Apple, 1986). Because developing their own curriculum is no longer a responsibility or a right for many teachers, their time is taken over by dealing with trivial matters related to technical and management concerns. This is an example of a teacher proofing curriculum practice that is contributing to subjugation of the idea of teaching as a true and autonomous profession.

Class dynamics has been and continues to be a factor related to who becomes a teacher and what their experiences are (Apple, 1986). A majority of teachers, mainly women, in America continue to come from the lower middle class and upper lower class. This has been an occurrence for teachers in America throughout the history of public schools. The history of school teaching is the history of political, economic and cultural struggles (Apple, 1986). This point is made very clear by Apple (1986), when he states that, “It is the history of a gendered workforce who, in the face of attempts to restructure their jobs, fought back consciously and unconsciously” (p. 76).

The relationship between family socioeconomic background and educational occupational attainment decisions of students who become teachers has been influenced by decisions from those in power in America for a long period of time. Teaching has traditionally been the first step out of working class status—until recently—problem now is the change in American job structure. Generational mobility generally does not move two places up in one generation in regards to the working class and the lower middle class. However, it does for third generation upper middles. This does have an impact with regard to the professional status of those who become teachers. Gender and social class issues are another factor as to why teaching has such an ambiguous status as a profession.

Conclusion

In the opening remarks of this paper, it was stated that teachers aspire to be seen as true professionals with expert knowledge concerning the content and methods of instruction in their particular areas of study. The first question asked was what are the characteristics of a full profession and how and which characteristics can we ascribe to teaching. It appears some advances have been made to address the shortcomings of teaching in relationship to the four characteristics of a full profession.

Teaching has been influenced by government, business, gender, and social class issues for the past 200 years of American history. It would be naïve to believe that these factors will change anytime soon. However, it appears imperative that we start or continue to dialog with all constituents on the issue of the status of teaching as a profession and try to remove the ambiguity associated with teaching as a profession. Discussing it will hopefully allow people to continue to talk, think, and write about this issue.

References

- Apple, M. (1986). *Teachers and texts*. New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Apple, M. (1990). Is there a curriculum voice to reclaim? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70 (7), 526-530.
- Boyd, P.C. (1994). Professional school reform and public school renewal: Portrait of a partnership. *The Journal of Teacher Education*, 45 (2), 132-139.
- Buck, G.H., Polloway, E.A., Mortorff, S.M. (1995). Alternative certification programs: A national survey. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 18 (1), 39-48.
- Corwin, R.G. (1965). *A sociology of education: Emerging patterns of class, status, and power in the public schools*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Corwin, R.G. (1970). *Militant professionalism: A study of militant conflict in high schools*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- DeYoung, A.J. (1989). *Economics and American education: A historical and critical overview of the impact of economic theories on schooling in the United States*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Etzioni, A. (1969). *The semiprofessions and organizations: Teachers, nurses, and social workers*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Filler, L. (1965). *Horace Mann: On the crisis in education*. Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch Press.

- Gideonse, H.D. (1989). *Relating knowledge to teacher education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
- Holland, J. (1980). *Women's occupational choice: The impact of sexual divisions in society*. Stockholm, Sweden: Department of Educational Research, Stockholm Institute of Education, Reports on Educational Psychology.
- Howsam, R.B. (1976). *Educating a profession*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
- Koerner, J.D. (1963). *The miseducation of American teachers*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Krug, E.A. (1972). *The shaping of American high school, 1920-1941*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Levine, D.U., & Levine, R.F. (1996). *Society and education* (9th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- McNeil, L.M. (1986). *Contradictions of control*. New York, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Messerli, J. (1972). *Horace Mann: A biography*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Natale, J.A. (1993). Why teachers leave. *Executive Educator*, 8-15.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (1998). AACTE strategic plan includes focus on accreditation. *NCATE Reporter*, 5.
- National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2001). *A decade of growth: 1991-2001*, 4.
- NEA Today, (1995). Teaching low on the pay scale. *Author*, 5.
- Ornstein, A.C. (1990). Teacher salaries in social context. *High School Journal*, 129-132.
- Ornstein, A.C., & Levine, D.U. (2003). *Foundations of education* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rothman, R. (1995). *Measuring up*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rowan, B. (1994). Comparing teachers work with work in other occupations: Notes on the professional status of teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 4-17, 21.
- Rosenholtz, S.J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social workers*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Saphier, J.D. (1995). *Bonfires and magic bullets: Making teaching a true profession*. Carlisle, MA: Research for Better Teaching.

- Shapiro, H.S., & Purpel, D.E. (1993). *Critical issurs in American education: Toward the 21st century*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Shapiro, H.S., & Purpel, D.E. (Eds.). (2005). *Critical issues in American education: Democracy and meaning in a globalizing world*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Shulman, L.S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations and the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 324.
- Smyth, J., Shacklock, G., & Hattam, R. (1997). Teacher development in difficult times. *Teacher Development*.
- Treiman, D.J. (1977). *Occupational prestige in comparative perspective*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Tyson-Bernstein, H. (1987). The Texas teacher appraisal system: What does it really appraise? *American Educator*, 26-31.
- Wise, A.E. (1988). Legislative learning revisited. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 328-333.