Reclaiming teaching as a profession based on autonomy and trust

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Abstract

This article considers different views of what it means to act as a professional and relates these to teaching. The traditional, covenantal one described by Shulman which emphasises autonomy and trust is contrasted with the contractual one associated with neoliberalism based on compliance with externally set standards. Restricted and extended professionality are also compared. A view of teacher professionalism based on a covenantal and extended view is essential if highly motivated teachers able to meet the needs of children and young people and the dynamic, challenging demands of 21st century classrooms and societies are to be attracted and retained. Teachers need to take a major role in reclaiming this view.

Keywords: covenantal professionalism, contractual professionalism, autonomy, trust, extended professionality

Introduction

This article explores different ideas of what it means to be, and act as, a professional and applies these to teacher professionalism, to argue that a view based on autonomy and trust is required if the current neoliberal agenda is to be challenged and children's and society's needs prioritised. While the main focus is on England, similar trends and implications apply in other systems, though less strongly in other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom.

There is no universally agreed understanding of what being – or acting as – a professional entails. For instance, would one describe farmers or footballers, estate agents or electricians as professionals? Most people would probably agree that, in some ways, they can be, but that they are not professionals in the same sense as one would describe a doctor, a dentist or an accountant – or a teacher. This may raise questions in some people's minds such as:

- how important is it that professionals should be smartly dressed?
- should they ever go on strike and if so in what circumstances?
- to what extent should they conform without question to external requirements?

This article mainly addresses the last of these questions and some implications for teachers in the current policy context.

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Few teachers would not regard themselves as professionals, even if they may often be annoyed at not being treated as such. But in Helsby's words, 'there is nothing simple or static about the concept of teacher professionalism in England: it is constantly changing and constantly being redefined in different ways at different times to serve different interests.'[1] In 1969, Etzioni coined the term 'semi-professionals' to describe groups such as teachers, nurses and social workers who were not accorded the same respect as doctors and lawyers.[2] It is no coincidence that most teachers of young children, like nurses, are women, with (mostly male) teachers of older children having a higher status; and that most teachers did not require a degree until the 1970s.

This reflects the enduring view that teaching is basically quite simple, an activity that anyone with a reasonable level of knowledge of a subject can do supported by a good textbook and a little guidance. This is especially so in relation to those who teach young children, even though research such as Shulman's, let alone the experience of anyone who has actually tried to teach, indicates that teaching is far more complex, and requires a much wider range of types of knowledge and skills, than it seems.[3] One positive consequence of the lockdown may be a greater recognition among parents and others that this is so. The view of teaching as relatively simple is also reflected in the short period of training to qualify as a teacher in England compared to most other professions and many other jurisdictions.

Teaching has therefore always struggled to be seen as a profession comparable to medicine and the law. Beck suggests that government policy in England since the 1988 Act – and arguably before that – has led to the de-professionalisation of teachers in the guise of re-professionalisation and modernisation.[4] While this has been the result of government policy, Beck argues that the fragmentation of the teaching profession and lack of a strong, united professional body, and teachers' unwillingness or inability to articulate what is distinctive in terms of knowledge and pedagogy, made them vulnerable to those in different governments who wished to control teachers and education more broadly. Teachers as a group have not been successful in countering the view that teaching is simple by articulating well, to themselves, to each other and more widely, the often-subtle aspects of what teaching involves.

The next section discusses how being a professional has traditionally been understood, before applying these considerations to teaching, contrasting two main views. A discussion of some implications for professional development introduces the idea of extended professionality. This is followed by a consideration of why the view of professionalism which teachers, as individuals and as a profession, hold matters. The conclusion argues for reclaiming, and working collectively for, a view of professionalism based on greater autonomy for, and trust in, teachers which challenges the neoliberal agenda and helps to meet the diverse needs of children and of society more appropriately than at present.

How has being a professional traditionally been conceived?

One obvious aspect of being a professional relates to how well tasks are carried out. Professionals are almost always more skilled than amateurs in carrying out a particular activity, with professionalism specific to that activity, even though attitudes such as care or pride in one's work may be transferable between activities. A somewhat outdated distinction is that between professionals and amateurs, most obviously in the realm of sport. In contrast to amateurs, who were seen as gentlemen (sic) and did not need to be paid, professionals were paid and seen as of lower status, even if they were (as they usually were) more skilled performers. While this distinction has mostly disappeared from sport, some element survives in the view that professionals in the public sector are seen as having a vocation and not needing to be paid as much as people with comparable qualifications in the private sector.

What professionalism involves is not just an individual matter. How an individual understands what it means to be and act as a professional is to some extent dependent on how professionals, as a group, see themselves and act. But this is also affected by how other people outside the profession perceive them. And as Evans argues, 'a meaningful conception of professionalism must reflect the *reality* of daily practices'.[5] She goes on to say that any such conception that is required or even demanded 'is bound to dissipate into impracticable rhetoric' as it is translated into practice.

Let us consider how being a member of a profession has traditionally been conceived. Shulman, having spent many years comparing different professions, especially medicine, the law and teaching, proposes that all professions are characterised by:

- service to others
- understanding of a scholarly or theoretical kind
- skilled performance or practice
- the exercise of judgement under conditions of considerable uncertainty
- learning from experience as theory and practice interact
- a professional community to monitor quality and aggregate knowledge.[6]

Similarly, John highlights as characteristics typical of all professions:

- mastery of a knowledge base requiring a long period of training
- tasks that are inherently valuable to society
- a desire to prioritise the client's welfare
- a high level of autonomy
- a code of ethics to guide practice.[7]

These characteristics are the foundation of a *covenantal* approach, with a significant level of autonomy and trust, an emphasis on the needs of clients and a strong sense that members of a profession help to define and to regulate what professionalism entails. A body which determines how professionals should act, based on a code of ethics, has been a key feature of how professions such as medicine and the law have operated. While these bodies have sometimes been overprotective of some members, they have helped – in contrast to teaching – in reducing the level of external interference in how professionals should act.

Professionalism has been redefined in many professions in recent years, with the rise of neoliberalism, to reflect a *contractual* approach, based on measurable performance and compliance with external requirements, restricting individual autonomy and agency. Such a view sees professionalism as based on meeting a set of standards and competences which are relatively easy to observe and assess.

The change from a covenantal to a contractual approach has affected all professions, with control increasingly taken on by government and its regulatory agencies, but let us consider the implications for teachers.

Contrasting views of teachers as professionals

Hargreaves and Fullan make the distinction between being professional – how teachers act – and being a professional – related more to status and how other people regard teachers, though this inevitably affects how teachers feel and see themselves.[8] You may think that such distinctions are academic playing with words, but they represent a significant difference of view about what being a teacher entails and how teachers should act.

As discussed in the previous section, a covenantal view involves aspects such as autonomy, the exercise of judgement under conditions of uncertainty, prioritising the needs of clients and being part of a professional community. As we shall see, autonomy in teaching does not imply being able to do exactly what one wants, but must involve teachers exercising their judgement to act appropriately and often rapidly in face of the dilemmas inherent in teaching. Otherwise, teachers end up as no more than what Winch, Oancea and Orchard call executive technicians.[9] The discussion of whether teaching is an art, a craft or a science is somewhat facile as it involves aspects of all three. Teachers need the creativity of an artist, the practical knowledge associated with a craft and the more theoretical knowledge which science implies. To reduce it to just one of these is to devalue teaching as a profession.

All teachers are, rightly, expected to adhere to broad norms of conduct associated with acting as a professional, often articulated as a set of standards, and to act within the broad parameters and expectations set by the school, reflecting the

school's ethos and values. But such expectations must offer chances for individuals to experiment and to establish their own teaching styles and identities, avoiding the situation where all teachers are expected to act according to a single template, as clones or 'identikit' teachers. Lists of competences and standards to define what being a teacher entails may be useful when deciding on minimum requirements. However, they take little account of social, emotional and personal qualities, and so underplay the relationships which matter so much in teaching. A competence-based view too easily becomes limiting and squeezes the creativity out of teaching – and teachers.

A culture of performativity with strong accountability mechanisms both imposes on teachers and encourages a contractual view of professionalism, individually and as a group. While this may provide greater consistency, it represents a move away from, and easily undermines, a view of professionalism which prioritises children's well-being and the professional's responsibility to promote this. Moreover, a competence-based model and contractual view of teacher professionalism oversimplifies the aims of education by defining success largely in terms of a narrow range of measurable outcomes, so creating dissonances for those teachers who see their role more broadly and interfering with their professional judgement.

An interesting and contested question is in what ways teacher professionalism varies and should vary between different ages and subject areas. This question is especially important in terms of the types of knowledge which teachers require and manifest, given the traditional higher status accorded to teachers of older children or students. One central aspect of being a professional relates to mastery of a knowledge base, but what this entails is more complex than it may seem. Recently, there has been a considerable emphasis on teachers' subject knowledge. But teaching in the dynamic world of the classroom requires far more than knowing information about the subject matter. Many other types of knowledge are needed, especially the practical, craft knowledge associated with skilled performance in particular disciplines, and the personal and interpersonal knowledge to interact successfully with a group of children, so that they acquire a lifelong love of learning.

Berliner writes that 'learning to teach … is primarily about learning to codify knowledge in order to draw on it again'. [10] Such codified, or structured, knowledge is often called pedagogical content knowledge, which Shulman defines as 'a particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspect of content most germane to its teachability … the most useful forms of representation … the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations and demonstrations – in a word, the ways of formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others'. [11] The complexity of the classroom means that teachers need the pedagogical content knowledge and craft and case knowledge – and all the thousands of small, often tacit, hard-to-see and even harder-to-learn skills

these categories embrace. They need to be attuned to the background, moods and responses of specific individuals and groups of children to try and ensure their overall, and long-term, well-being.

My background is in primary education and I have a particular interest in the breadth of knowledge which primary classroom teachers require and their ability to meet the varying needs of a class of children.[12] However, early years teachers often manifest a particular flexibility and level of planning for the unexpected, as well as a detailed knowledge of child development and of the children whom they teach; and secondary teachers require a considerable depth of knowledge usually in a narrower range of subject areas. It is unhelpful to see one role as inherently more difficult than others, though particular contexts, classes or individuals may need specific personal qualities and different types and levels of professional knowledge.

Prioritising the needs of 'clients' – particularly children, but also parents/carers – is one of the most difficult areas for many teachers in a context where professionalism is contractual. Most teachers of children in the early years recognise the importance of play-based learning, those in the primary sector that the arts and humanities are essential in engaging and motivating children and secondary teachers frequently lament the dominance of exams in what is taught, and how. Yet, a narrow, prescriptive curriculum, accompanied by frequent high-stakes testing and accountability mechanisms, too often discourages teachers from doing what they – and the voices of experience and of theory – believe will most enhance children's learning and well-being in the long-term.

A covenantal view carries the risk that some teachers will not repay the trust placed in them, whether intentionally or not – and may need support or to be held to account. However, a contractual view leads to a greater risk – that teachers will become more conforming and less imaginative and, even more seriously, prioritise aspects such as trying to ensure that children achieve high test scores or to please inspectors over the broader, long-term needs of children's well-being on the basis of their professional knowledge and experience.

Implications for professional development

As Johnson and Golombek suggest, 'professional development emerges from a process of reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods or materials on teachers.' [13] How this process operates and professional judgement is developed is a complex, long-term process, as discussed in Eaude, particularly in relation to primary classroom teachers.[14] However, several elements are captured in the distinction between restricted and extended professionality, as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1

restricted professionality	*extended professionality*
skills derived from experience	skills derived from a mediation between experience and theory
a perspective limited to the here-and-now and classroom events being perceived in isolation	having a perspective beyond the classroom embracing the broader social context
individual autonomy	collective autonomy
introspection about methodology	developing one's teaching methodology by comparing it to others
limited involvement in professional activities outside teaching, reading professional literature and attending training other than practical courses	placing a high value on professional activities and literature and training which combine theoretical and practical elements
teaching being seen as largely intuitive	seeing teaching as a rational rather than an intuitive activity

Adapted from Hargreaves and Goodson [15]

Key aspects of an extended professionality include relating theory and experience, having a perspective beyond the immediate context, and comparing and learning from other teachers, especially those with greater experience and/or expertise. I suggest that autonomy is not just individual, so that any teacher can do what they like, but collective in that teachers should learn from each other and have broadly complementary approaches, while recognising that all teachers, inevitably and rightly, have different pedagogies and styles. However, I question the idea that teaching is rational rather than intuitive, since teachers (like other professionals) with a high level of expertise rely heavily on intuition and case knowledge when having to make quick decisions, though they are also rational and reflective in terms of their overall approach and in their planning.

Extended professionals maintain their existing 'tools' and techniques ready for use and practice using them in new, imaginative ways. They may keep some for occasional use, or even discard a few, and constantly refine how they use the tools at their disposal to achieve their aims. But extended professionality does not entail simply acquiring new tools and learning how to use them skilfully. Teachers who are extended professionals continually re-examine their aims and objectives and consider how to meet these, in the light of their values and beliefs, the changing context and

individual needs and responses.

Recalling the idea of pedagogical content knowledge, teachers, especially when inexperienced, need to learn subject knowledge with a view to understanding how to teach it, for instance in enabling children to make sense of abstract ideas and in identifying common misconceptions. In addition, teachers require the ability to reflect-in-action and exercise what Sawyer calls 'disciplined improvisation'.[16] Such abilities tend to be based on case knowledge – the sort of intuitive practical knowledge based on 'I've been in a similar situation before'.

This section has started to consider how teachers become and can be helped to become extended professionals. This process takes many years of learning, not just from experience, but from both experience and theory. It cannot be learned on a short course, however good, any more than the detailed knowledge required to be an accountant or a doctor can.

Why does teacher professionalism matter?

How teachers see themselves, are seen, and act as professionals matters for several interlinked reasons. First, the example which teachers set, and who they are, has a profound, direct influence on children, especially in terms of passion and enthusiasm – and the values and attitudes which are so much more elusive and harder to measure than propositional knowledge. For teachers to see themselves, and act, just as deliverers of knowledge encourages superficial learning for children and teachers alike.

Second, a robust but flexible sense of identity and an extended sense of professionality helps teachers to avoid acting just as technicians, and so unlikely to exercise, and develop, a high level of expertise and judgement – and to act compassionately, bearing in mind what the children they are teaching really need. This matters particularly for those children who for whatever reason do not engage well with the current curriculum.

Third, as Bransford *et al.* argue, 'developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers' commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms of practice'. [17] The more one moves away from viewing teachers as technicians and purveyors of information, the more a nuanced view of professional identity matters. How teachers see themselves, and how they are seen, affects their morale and resilience and the extent to which they wish to continue as teachers. This includes the recognition that teachers' own well-being helps to ensure the children's, even though many teachers may endanger their well-being, and sometimes their health, by working unnecessarily long hours.

Fourth, how teachers understand, and feel about, their role and what it entails, and are motivated is integral to how, and how well, they teach. Teacher motivation, and sense of agency, matter, especially at a time when so many teachers feel sufficiently

disillusioned to leave the profession, or to consider seriously whether to do so. If highly motivated, skilled teachers are to be attracted and retained, a more covenantal approach to teacher professionalism is required.

Fifth, a lack of status and confidence, individually and collectively, means that teachers' identities may not be sufficiently robust to resist the imposition of inappropriate methods of teaching. But addressing such issues needs to be a collective rather than just an individual matter. So, how professionalism is understood affects to what extent the profession, collectively, can try and ensure that how children are taught is not left to those with little understanding of children's lives and how they learn, but definite views not only of what, but of how, teachers should teach.

Conclusion

Ideas of teacher professionalism have changed significantly in the last 40 years from a covenantal view based on autonomy and trust to a contractual one based on compliance with externally set expectations and standards. This has been a key, though too rarely noticed, aspect of a neoliberal approach, in many countries, which has led to those outside the profession, especially politicians, exerting greater control of both the curriculum and pedagogy, often in great detail. The change has been buttressed by high-stakes testing and punitive accountability mechanisms which have contributed significantly to the anxiety which permeates the system. It has de-professionalised teachers and discouraged an extended view of professionality. The consequences have been severe, in terms of teacher morale, motivation and retention, and a narrower and less engaging curriculum, though some scope for professional judgement on pedagogy remains.

How professionals act matters more than how they look. Unless teacher professionalism involves the characteristics identified by Shulman and John, nothing substantial distinguishes teachers from technicians. To meet the long-term needs of children and young people and the dynamic, challenging demands of 21st century classrooms and societies, teachers must act, be seen and see themselves as professionals with distinctive, complex types of knowledge and collective autonomy, not just as deliverers of content and transmitters of information.

The de-professionalisation of teachers by government has continued, and arguably become stronger, since Beck's article some 15 years ago. To address this, the government should, ideally, start to treat teachers as professionals, not only in terms of pay and workload, but also greater autonomy and trust. But the situation is too urgent to wait for any government to do so. To reclaim such a view of professionalism, teachers must be less compliant and more forthright about what teaching really involves and more subversive, acting, as Kidd suggests, like dandelions – pushing up through the cracks

and resisting the performance-related pressures that can lead teachers to act without integrity or compassion.[18] At the risk of sounding like an ardent Brexiteer, it is time for teachers, and the teaching profession, to 'take back control'.

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Notes

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