

# The Classroom Situation: Does Teaching Qualify To Be Called a Profession?

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## Abstract

For the past five decades, educators have been debating over whether teaching can be considered a profession. Studies have investigated theories of professionalisation; consensus has not been reached on how a profession should be defined. This conceptual paper explores the definition and characteristics of a profession justifying why teaching qualifies to be a profession. The paper argues that teaching is a professional career where an individual is held accountable through a series of tests, assessments and tools to gauge the achievement of students and their learning. Teaching is a partnership between schools, community, and parents to help children succeed in their academic careers. Each time a teacher has exposure to a student they have the opportunity to provide building blocks for students to take with them to new studies.

**Keywords:** Classroom, profession, teaching, education, occupation, specialisation, knowledge.

## 1. Introduction

According to Taylor and Runté (1995), for the last 50 years, educators have devoted a great deal of energy to the debate over whether teaching can be considered a profession. Numerous studies have investigated theories of professionalisation. However, consensus has not been reached on how a profession should be defined. Competing theories have defined the concept of profession and each has a different perspective (Yee, 2001). This paper explores the definition and characteristics of a profession justifying why teaching qualifies to be a profession

### Definition of Terms

#### Profession

In simple terms a profession is an occupation that requires specialised education, knowledge, training and ethics. Although professionals make their living in what they do, this paid work is often more than just a job or occupation alone. Whether the occupation is law, medicine, plumbing, writing or baseball, those who are in it are expected to meet and maintain common standards (<http://www.wisegeek.org/what-is-a-profession.htm>, accessed on 21 October 2013).

#### Teaching

Teaching is not only about getting students to learn facts. It is about engaging a student and making them eager to learn. Teaching is seeing a student's weaknesses and strengths, and helping them recognise them and use them to their advantage. (<http://www.ask.com/question/what-is-teaching-all-about>, accessed on 21 October 2013).

## 2. Characteristics of a Profession

Dingwall (1976: 331) sees profession as 'a concept which is notorious for the diversity of its definitions and usage and concludes that it is a fruitless exercise to define profession. This definitional problem is,

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according to Freidson (1983: 22), “created by attempting to treat profession as if it were a generic concept rather than a changing historic concept. Freidson (Ibid) concludes that the historical character of the concept and the many perspectives from which it can legitimately be viewed preclude the hope of any widely-accepted definition of general analytic value. Thus it is concluded that the concept of profession is a changing historic concept which, to a certain extent, reflects the values of the society of the time (Yee, 2001: 2).

Perhaps the starting point in understanding a profession is Webb and Webb’s (1917) assertion that a profession is a vocation founded upon specialised educational training, the purpose of which is to supply objective counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation. A profession arises when any trade or occupation transforms itself through “the development of formal qualifications based upon education, apprenticeship, and examinations, the emergence of regulatory bodies with powers to admit and discipline members, and some degree of monopoly rights” (Bullock and Trombley, 1999).

The word profession is derived from the word “profiteor” meaning to profess. The connotation here is that a professional is a person who possesses knowledge of something and has a commitment to a particular set of values both of which are generally well accepted characteristics of professions. History records the early professions of the priesthood, law, medical/physicians and university teaching. As time progressed, dentistry, engineering, accountants and architects were ascribed “professional” status (Bullock and Trombley, 1999).

Professions are, ideally, made up of people with high ethical standards who have special knowledge and skills. Greenwood (1957: 46) asserts that all professions possess a systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes and a culture. He thinks that with respect to each of these attributes, the true difference between a professional and a non-professional occupation is not a qualitative but a quantitative one. These attributes are not the exclusive monopoly of the professions; non-professional occupations also possess them, but to a lesser degree. The responsibility of people in certain occupations to the public is an important distinction from those who may participate in the fields on an amateur or non-professional basis. For example, if a homeowner hires a non-licensed plumber to save money, he or she would not be able to hold this person to the same standards as a licensed professional in the same industry.

Such sentiments were echoed by Barber (1963: 672) who thinks professionalism is a matter of degree. For him professional behaviour can be defined in terms of four essential attributes, including a high degree of generalised and systematic knowledge; primary orientation to the community interest rather than to individual self-interest; a high degree of self-control of behaviour through codes of ethics internalised in the process of work socialisation and through voluntary associations organised and operated by the work specialists themselves; and a system of rewards (monetary and honorary) that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement and thus ends in themselves, not means to some end of individual self-interest.

Similarly, Moore (1976: 5-6) offers another set of defining characteristics, namely full-time occupation; commitment to a calling; identified with their peers—often in formalised organisation; possession of esoteric but useful knowledge and skills, based on specialised training or education of exceptional duration and perhaps of exceptional difficulty; service orientation; and autonomy. He suggests that these characteristics are not ‘of equal value, and can be regarded as points ...along a scale of professionalism’.

Various other researchers offer their list of characteristics to distinguish profession from non-profession. Millerson (1964) performs an analysis of characteristics put forward by a number of researchers and identified six essential features of profession:

- A profession involves a skill based on theoretical knowledge;
- The skill requires training and education;
- The professional must demonstrate competence by passing a test;
- Integrity is maintained by adherence to a code of conduct;
- The service is for the public good; and
- The profession is organized.

People within some careers are at a much different level, as well as held to a higher degree of responsibility, than those doing the same thing as a hobby or on a more casual basis. For instance, an aspiring writer who writes for no or low pay would not necessarily be expected to produce the same quality of work as a professionally experienced author who makes a full-time living at the craft. In some professions, an amateur or hobby level is not allowed for reasons of public safety. For example, only a professional physician with qualified credentials is permitted to treat patients as a medical doctor.

According to Goodson (2003) occupational status depend on the public valuing of the competence, role and overall contribution of a particular occupation to individual and societal welfare. He asserted that occupations that have attained professional status share the following characteristics:

- A high level of education and training base on a unique and specialized body of knowledge;
- A strong ideal of public service with an enforced professional code of conduct and high levels of respect from the public domain;
- Registration and regulation by the profession itself;
- Trusted to act in the client's best interest within a framework of accountability; and
- Similar levels of compensation as other professions.

Millerson (1964), however, feels that such attempts to define professions may be biased and do not take into account the dynamic situation facing professions. The argument is any professional occupation is inextricably linked to the kind of society in which it exists—to its political and economic environments, its social structure, as well as its cultural norms. All these constituent parts of a society are undergoing changes continuously. The concept of profession is therefore a changing concept, the understanding of which would require taking a broader perspective than just identifying a check-list of attributes. This is why Vollmer and Mills (1966: 46) think professionalisation does not occur in a vacuum. Like other social processes, it cannot be understood without taking into account certain aspects of the larger society in which it takes place.

Predicated upon the attributes discussed above, one could note that a profession performs essential social service. Teaching profession, beyond all reasonable doubt, meets this criterion, for education is a social service. The service which education performs is essential to the individual child who could not be fully socialised in society if he did not spend lengthy period in full time formal education. But what is teaching?

### **3. Teaching and Professionalism**

Among the many professions the world over, the teaching profession is considered one of the noblest and straight forward in definition. It is dissected as:

- The facilitation of student learning;
- Imparting knowledge or skill;
- Intended behavior to induce learning (<http://www.inprofiledaily.com/id=8935:teaching-profession-definition-of-teaching>, accessed 21 October 2013).

Teaching profession was further defined by Wells (1998) as a cluster of activities that are noted about teachers such as explaining, deducing, questioning, motivating, taking attendance, keeping record of works, students' progress and students' background information.

Moreover, Farrell and Oliveira (1993) posits that teaching can be viewed as the logical and strategic act denoting interaction between the teacher and the student as they operate on some kind of verifiable facts and beliefs. It encourages student's participation and expression of their own views. The teaching profession encompasses schooling and education. While schooling has a terminal point that make us graduate from various gradation, education is interminable and goes on from the cradle to the grave. Hence, education developed from the human struggle for survival. Gerald (1994) opined that education encompasses both teaching and learning of knowledge, proper conduct and technical competency. Education has also been defined as the transfer of survival skills from one generation to another. That is, education is a process

through which the intellectual and moral capacities of individuals are developed, so as to make them cultural members of their society.

The business of teachers is to help students to achieve higher standards of knowledge, ability, skills and moral character. If teachers do their work well, then their work is of great value to others, not simply in a particular time but also in the future. Teachers are not only workers but are also members of a profession. Their occupation renders definite and essential services to society. As a profession, however, teaching has had a long and difficult history.

One of the teaching profession's difficult experiences is that the public has not adequately supported teaching. Compared with other learned professions-such as medicine, law, engineering and architecture, teaching ranks low. Some teachers are dissatisfied with, and even depressed about their professional standing. They feel that the work load is too heavy, and the recognition and appreciation are too limited. They think that they do not have sufficient opportunities to advance in their career and that they have no power to control the content and form of their work. Teachers resent prohibition against their direct involvement in policy making in educational affairs.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper concludes that teaching is a professional career where an individual is held accountable through a series of tests, assessments and tools to gauge the achievement of students and their learning. The paper argues that teaching is a partnership between schools, community, and parents to help children succeed in their academic careers. Each time a teacher has exposure to a student they have the opportunity to provide building blocks for students to take with them to new studies. Teaching is such a rewarding and challenging career, as teacher reach outside the box, and then out-side their range of knowledge to help students overcome academic, social and emotional challenge to ensure success.

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