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Defining “Teacher Professionalism” from different perspectives

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how teacher professionalism is defined in scholarly debates in recent times. Within this purpose the definitions of professionalism, criteria of professionalism, the characteristics of a professional teacher and the status of teacher professionalism will be discussed from different perspectives. In historical context, the issue that whether teaching is a professional status or not has been controversial. According to some authors (e.g. Leiter, 1978; Samuels, 1970), teaching is a semi-professional job because they are directed to perform certain standards by their superiors. As a result of this, teachers' individual autonomy and decision making powers are limited. Some authors (e.g. Stevenson, Carter ve Passy, 2007; Ozga, 1981) believe that it is more useful to approach professionalism as an ideological construct that is used for occupational control on teachers. Another approach (e.g. Phelps, 2006) reflects a positive attitude towards teacher professionalism and identifies the term as the best and highest standards for teachers. This paper will offer an operational definition of teacher professionalism and an integrative approach about multiple interpretations of teacher professionalism in sociological, political and educational context. In the light of multiple approaches, it will be concluded that teacher professionalism means meeting certain standards in education and it is related to proficiency.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, first the concept of professionalism is defined from the point of different perspectives and then how these definitions are associated to teaching profession is analyzed. The concept of professionalism in teaching is commonly discussed on sociological, educational and ideological bases in the literature. Secondly, the key ideas of professionalism approaches underlying these bases are reflected in brief. Lastly, in the light of multiple perspectives and arguments, a workable definition for today's teacher professionalism notion and an interpretation embracing these perspectives are tried to be presented.

The need to attain and develop certain standards and benchmarking criteria for all professions has increased in today's competitive work conditions. Standards create a professional environment of “best practice” procedures enabling organizations to confidently create systems, policies and procedures; they also assure high operational quality (Krishnaveni ve Anitha, 2007). This phenomenon makes a current issue of improving the occupation standards and qualifications of teachers' to comply with the contemporary developments like other occupation groups in other organizations. At this point, the concept of professionalism comes into prominence which is considered to be one of the key elements of effectiveness in work life.

The concept has been a controversial one in different occupation groups with a long history especially in sociological ground and still it is the subject of many scholarly debates. The dynamic nature of the term and its multiple interpretations introduce different definitions of the concept with different functions. When the subject is

teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003, 17), the meaning of the term changes as a response to external pressures, public discourses and scientific developments. However, it seems possible to make a workable professionalism definition in the field of education based on these different approaches. So, it would be useful to begin with some definitions.

2. The Concept of Professionalism

It is important to locate conceptions of teacher professionalism in relation to changing historical, political and social contexts because multiple meanings have changed and developed over time and in contestation between rival stakeholder groups and their interests (Hilferty, 2008). The concept of professionalism is used in different senses and somewhat difficult to define. For example, in daily language, it is generally used to mean an activity for which one is paid as opposed to doing voluntarily. The term is also used to classify the status of occupation groups in terms of respectability (Kennedy, 2007). In the business world, professionalism is generally synonymous with “success” or refers to the expected behaviors of individuals in specific occupations (Tichenor ve Tichenor, 2005).

The terms “profession” and “professor” have their etymological roots in the Latin for profess. To be a professional or a professor was to profess to be an expert in some skill or field of knowledge (Baggini, 2005). In 1975, Hoyle defined professionalism as ‘those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions’ (cited in Evans, 2007). In his another work, Hoyle (2001) states that professionalism is related to the improvement in the quality of service rather than the enhancement of status. Boyt, Lusch and Naylor (2001) explains the concept as a multi-dimensional structure consisting of one’s attitudes and behaviors towards his/her job and it refers to the achievement of high level standards. If we synthesize the definitions up to now, it is possible to interpret professionalism as a multi dimensional structure including one’s work behaviors and attitudes to perform the highest standards and improve the service quality.

Before deepening the teacher professionalism discussions, it would be useful to mention the distinction between the two terms “professionalism” and “professionalization” which usually accompany each other in scholarly discourses. Professionalization is related to “promoting the material and ideal interests of an occupational group” (Goodson, 2000, 182) so it includes “the attempt to gain professional associated with professions” (Whitty, 2000) whereas professionalism “focuses on the question of what qualifications and acquired capacities, what competence is required for the successful exercise of an occupation (Englund, 1996, 76).

David refers to five commonly cited professionalism criteria focused in the literature. They are (David, 2000): (a) professions provide an important public service, (b) they involve a theoretically as well as practically grounded expertise, (c) they have a distinct ethical dimension which calls for expression in a code of practice, (d) they require organization and regulation for purposes of recruitment and discipline and, (e) professional practitioners require a high degree of individual autonomy- independence of judgment- for effective practice.

Barber (1965) explains four main characteristics of professional behavior as follows: (a) a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge, (b) orientation primarily to community interest rather than to individual self-interest, (c) a high degree of self-control of behavior through codes of ethics in the process of work socialization, (d) a system of rewards seen primarily as symbols of work achievement.

Autonomy is one of the main focuses featured in professionalism characteristics. Forsyth and Danisiewicz (1985) contributes professionalism debates stating that, the tasks of professionals are important, exclusive and complex, so professionals should have the autonomous decision making powers free from external pressures. Another author states that one of the major objectives and attractions of movement to professionalize teachers is to provide professional autonomy (Bull, 1998). Autonomy is a component of teacher professionalism and it provides both an individual decision making area to achieve one’s aims and an effect on controlling the situations related to his/her work. Autonomy not only functions as a buffer against the pressures on teachers but also means of strengthening them in terms of personal and professional sense (Friedman, 1999). Consequently, it has an opposite function of organizational control (1978; Johnson, 1992; Bull, 1988).

It appears that the focuses on defining and conceptualizing the nature of professionalism are, “the respectability status of the occupation (e.g. Hoyle, 1975; Kennedy, 2007)”, improvement of service quality (e.g. Hoyle, 2001), “achievement of the highest standards (e.g. Boyt, Lusch ve Naylor (2001)”, “self-control (e.g. Barber, 1965)” and “professional autonomy (e.g. David, 2000; Leiter, 1978; Johnson, 1992; Bull, 1988)”.

3. Different Perspectives on Teacher Professionalism

Behind the arguments that teaching is a professional or a semi-professional occupation, the questioning whether teaching meets the criteria attributed to professional occupations lies. Traditional sociological approach delineates key traits of a professional occupation, largely based upon law and medicine. According to this approach, while the classical occupations like medicine and law are associated with high status and pay, the others seek an opportunity to attain such rewards through a “professionalization” process (Webb, Vulliamy, Hämäläinen, Sarja, Kimonen ve Nevalainen, 2004).

According to the authors supporting this approach, (Etzioni, 1969; David, 2000), the reason why nursing and teaching are accepted as “semi” or “quasi” professionals is that they couldn’t meet the criteria of professionalism wholly commonly referred in the literature. Leiter (1978) states that occupations such as teaching and nursing claim professional status but are not completely accorded this status because their individual autonomy is often under organizational control. More specifically, teachers are monitored by their administrators in terms of the consistency between their performance and the standards set before. As a result of this, they are directed and shaped by the administrators to achieve organizational goals so their autonomy is restricted. Samuels (1970) supports these arguments asserting that public school teachers do not have a high level of authority since the major decisions in educational settings are not taken by them.

Depending on the educational context, it is possible to say that definitions of teacher professionalism focuses on teachers’ professional qualifications such as “being good at his/her job”, “fulfilling the highest standards”, “and “achieving excellence”. For example, Baggini (2005) claims that for today’s teachers, professionalism is interpreted in terms of what extent the teachers outcome the difficulties and what extent they are able to use their skills and experiences related to their profession. On the most basic level, ‘professional teacher refers to the status of a person who is paid to teach’; on a higher level, it can refer to teachers who represent the best in the profession and set the highest standards (Tichenor and Tichenor, 2005). Phelps believes professionalism is enhanced when teachers use excellence as a critical criterion for judging their actions and attitudes. In other words, professionalism is measured by the best and the highest standards (Phelps, 2006).

In scholarly debates, two versions of teacher professionalism are portrayed as “old professionalism” and “new professionalism”. These two approaches emerged upon the changing social, political and cultural circumstances. However these two approaches are not completely opposite to each other. Sachs (2003) who developed this classification differentiates these two approaches as those: Old professionalism is concerned with; (a) exclusive membership, (b) conservative practices, (c) self-interest, (d) external regulation, (e) slow to change and, (f) reactive. The characteristics of new (transformative) professionalism are; (a) inclusive membership, (b) public ethical code of practice, (c) collaborative and collegial, (d) activist orientation, (e) flexible and progressive, (f) responsive to change, (g) self-regulating, (h) policy-active, (i) enquiry-oriented, (j) knowledge building.

New understanding of teacher professionalism provides professional space and conditions for the teachers to take responsibility in their practices. Sachs calls this transition from old to new understanding as “transformative professionalism” (Sachs, 2003). Sachs’s approach to teacher professionalism can be interpreted as an attempt to revitalize the concept in a rapidly changing work environment. He considers the teacher professionalism issue as a social and political strategy to promote the status of teaching profession. His approach is an alternative and contemporary one when compared to traditional approach.

Hargreaves (2000), analyzes the development of teacher professionalism as passing through four historical phases in many countries. The key features of these phases could be summarized as follows:

- 1) The pre-professional age: In this age, teaching was managerially demanding but technically simple so the teachers were only expected to carry out the directives of their knowledgeable superiors.
- 2) The age of autonomous professional: This age was remarked by a challenge to the singularity of teaching and the unquestioned traditions on which it is based. “Autonomy” was considered as an important component of teaching profession. The principle that teachers had the right to choose the methods they thought best for their students was questioned. Also, the teachers gained a considerable pedagogical freedom.
- 3) The age of collegial profession: This age draws attention with the increasing efforts to create strong professional cultures of collaboration to develop common purpose, to cope with uncertainty and complexity and to response the rapid changes and reforms effectively.

- 4) The post-professional age: This age is marked by a struggle between forces and groups intent on de-professionalizing the work of teaching, and other forces and groups who are seeking to re-define teacher professionalism and professional learning in more positive and principled postmodern ways that are flexible, wide-ranging and inclusive in nature.

Hargreaves defines today's professionalism as postmodern professionalism -a new era- marked by polarized directions. In the first direction, professionalism is portrayed as an exciting broad social movement that protects and advances teachers' professionalism by providing them learning to work effectively with groups and institutions beyond school; on the other hand it is portrayed as the de-professionalization of teachers crumble under multiple pressures and intensified work demands (Hargreaves, 2000).

Ozga (1995, 35), moves these discourses mentioned so far to a different base. She evaluates teacher professionalism in its historical and political context and interprets it as a device of professional control. Stevenson, Carter and Passy (2007) follows the same line with Ozga stating that "it is more useful to approach professionalism as an ideological construct that is neither static nor universal, but located in a particular socio-historical context and fashioned to represent and mobilize particular interests". According to Ozga and Lawn (1981), professionalism could operate "as a strategy for control of teachers manipulated by the State, while also being used by teachers to protect themselves against dilution". Furthermore, they claim that professionalism is used as an ideological weapon aimed at controlling teachers, at the same time as a weapon of self-defence for teachers in their struggle against dilution. Additionally, Evans (2007) remarks that a common feature of many conceptions of new professionalism is a focus on practitioner control and proactivity. Goodson (2000, 182) claims that there is a considerable antipathy to teacher professionalization. According to him, this antipathy stems from, cost-cutting central government; from well-entrenched education bureaucracies; and, perhaps most potently of all, from a range of business and corporate interests. Some of these oppositions are ideological but behind this ideological antipathy are a range of financial changes which sponsor the notion of retrenchment and cutback. It will be concluded that there is a consensus to a great extent that the purpose behind teacher professionalization attempts in ideological base are viewed as occupational control and authorizing teachers by intensifying the work demands.

4. Conclusion

In the light of the different approaches to teacher professionalism in scholarly debates, it is obvious that the meanings attributed to teacher professionalism and the status of teaching have a dynamic characteristic. This dynamism stems from the political and social changes and results in the shifting meaning and status of the teaching profession in historical context. Contemporary interpretations of teacher professionalism has a shift in meaning from the earlier notions in the sense that teachers confront with multiple pressures, intensified work demands and more occupational control in recent times.

It could be concluded from the discussions that we cannot talk about an agreement on the conceptualization of the term. On the other hand, considering the scholarly debates up to now, "teacher professionalism" could be interpreted as a professional work field with its sociological, ideological and educational dimensions aims at achieving the highest standards in teaching profession which is based upon the professional formation, knowledge, skill and values. The dominant discourses in the field of education indicate that teacher professionalism is associated with improving the quality and standards of teachers' works and their public image. Multiple approaches are common in the sense that teacher professionalism means meeting certain standards in education and related to proficiency. However, the meaning of the term and status of teaching profession is considered to be highly problematic and polarized in various spheres. At this point, as Whitty stated (2000), it is probably best to see the different positions about teacher professionalism in the twenty-first century as competing versions of teacher professionalism rather than seeing any one as fitting an essentialist definition of professionalism.

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