

## Professionalism and Teaching

Recently, a friend of mine, a nurse, told me that a friend of hers, a teacher, told her that nurses aren't really professionals. I'm not sure what ensued, and I didn't want to ask!

Nevertheless that conversation raised interesting and sometimes neglected issues concerning our place in the society alongside others who also fall under the banner of "professionals".

What is it that distinguishes people in some careers as professionals whereas others are regarded as labourers, civil servants, clerical workers, union employees and so forth?

The original "professionals" back in the in middle ages, were...teachers! Thus, "professors". If teachers today still wish to be thought of and treated as professionals, then in what ways are we aligned with those other professionals and, more importantly how should we conduct ourselves and how should we expect others to conduct themselves in their dealings with us?

Engineers, lawyers, architects, dentists and doctors are generally acknowledged to be professionals; they are university educated and they frequently upgrade their knowledge and practices. They usually hang out their own shingles, or do so in partnership with others, and thus control their salaries or fee structures, hours and conditions of work and manage their own benefits. They also, generally speaking provide services to those who freely seek them out. In some instances they can refuse to provide those services, but in other instances are compelled to provide them, even by law.

They also form their own professional associations or federations through which they monitor the ethics and practices of their colleagues, and certify, decertify, suspend or even discipline their colleagues according to circumstances.

So in some ways teachers are like those professionals, though in other ways we differ somewhat. As the largest identifiable group of employees in the community it would be impractical for teachers to set up individual or group practices. Those whom we serve are compelled by law to enroll in some type of public education (home schooling and certified private schools aside). We don't set our own fees or work schedules except through collective bargaining at either the provincial or local levels and we are required, out of necessity, to carry out certain clerical duties with respect to the daily management of our schools. But like other professionals, there is an implied social contract between the public and ourselves that allows us the independence to carry out our work and meet the standards expected by the society in which we work. This is spelled out in more detail in the new STF publication *Teacher Professionalism: A Public Trust*. All schools recently received copies of this pamphlet.

But when it comes to the actual core of the work that we do, we are called on to use our university educations, our own discretion, personal approaches and strategies as we teach our students. We are not "cookie-cutter" educators or workers on an assembly line. Of course there are provincial curricula, the Education Act and the Codes of Ethics/ Competence/Collective Interests of our own Federation that must be followed. But that doesn't really differ from any of the aforementioned professionals who also follow conventions or protocols (sometimes much more rigid than ours) but exercise considerable freedom in their work. But the responsibility for the essential work that we do ultimately falls on each and every individual's shoulders. And of course, over the term of a child's K-12 experience, the diverse approaches of dozens of teachers are truly enriching experiences in themselves.

Therefore it makes sense for us to conform to such things as the defined instructional day, assist in matters of attendance and record keeping, engage in “reasonable” amounts of parental contact, and provide general supervision around the school. But it also makes sense for us to question the assigning of new, often untried strategies and perhaps unnecessary “duties” that fall outside the job description of a modern teacher. Additional supervisory or clerical duties, new activities and projects or even meetings should not be blindly or timidly accepted, particularly if they diminish the quantity or quality of the work we do in the classroom or if they adversely affect a teacher’s personal pursuits and familial responsibilities outside the school day.

When new and worthwhile initiatives do come along, (e.g. early grades benchmarking, PLC’s) accommodations must be made to ensure that those negative effects are not felt.

As for how much we actual work we do measured in hours, that will depend on the individual teacher. It might take one lawyer four hours to prepare a pre-trial motion, whereas another could accomplish the same task in half that time, utilizing the remainder of the day as he or she sees fit. The same model can be applied to a teacher’s time outside the instructional day. As long as the work is satisfactorily done, then nobody should question how teachers spend that “other time.” That is another “professional” component of our work. Professionals don’t punch clocks. They get the job done. Sometimes that requires more hours; sometimes fewer.

Let me wind up with a concrete example about exercising professional discretion in the school. You may have heard of a situation where a teacher removes an “unruly” student from his or her classroom only to have the student sent back with no appropriate intervention or meaningful discussion between the teacher and the administration on the matter. Imagine how

that can affect what happens next in your classroom. Do you know what authority you have as a professional charged with specific responsibilities in that case? You might be surprised. If you check Appendix #2, *Duties of Teachers*, in our new Local Agreement (Section 231 of THE EDUCATION ACT attached at the request of our Board) you will find the answer very clearly spelled out. If you have acted in a professional manner in dealing with such a situation, then you should insist that you be treated as a professional in return, i.e. your authority should be respected and supported. If you think that hasn’t happened, first talk to the colleague involved. Then if you are still not satisfied, call me.

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