**Trust and the Professional Teacher**

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**Abstract**

*This paper is an exploration of the use of the trust relations of a profession as a way of understanding the significant elements of what it is to be a professional teacher. Of particular interest is trust in relation to the asymmetry between teachers as professionals and students as clients in terms of such things as knowledge and risk.*

Keywords: trust, professional teacher

**Introduction**

What might usefully be said about trust and the professional teacher? Well this depends, in part, on what we wish to know and why and also on what we identify as a ‘professional teacher’ and why.

Taking the latter matter first, we might distinguish a professional teacher from an amateur in terms of payment, expertise, commitment, time spent, employment status, obligations, etc. We might distinguish a professional teacher from a journeyman in terms expertise, level of skill, commitment, range of task. We might distinguish a professional teacher from someone teaching in the same institution but with different qualifications, job description with different expectations, responsibilities and rewards, e.g. a university researcher who also teaches or a Teach America school teacher. As a first step, in this paper ‘professional teacher’ is identified as a person employed to teach in a school. This selection is made because the work of such a person is taken to be part of the core business of PESA and, particularly, the core business of those PESA members engaged in teacher education. While this identification may exclude the amateur it does not exclude other descriptions and provides little help in an attempt to say something enlightening or useful.

Consideration of what we wish to know and why, might help advance things somewhat. The following are matters of ongoing concern: the expectations of teachers, how teachers should behave in the light of those expectations, and what conditions might facilitate the desired outcomes of teaching in classrooms. The use of ‘profession’ as a metaphor in relation to teaching (Maxwell, B., 2015) has been and can be intended to promote a particular set of expectations of teachers, their behavior and the conditions under which desired outcomes are achieved. The use of metaphor helps to highlight some aspects and hide others. Selection of a particular conception of ‘profession’ can therefore be quite useful in promoting an intended approach to teaching and schooling. In the second half of the twentieth century in Australia and like countries, ‘professional’ was used to enhance the importance of teachers’ individual expertise, personal autonomy, and collegial accountability. In the past 30 years the use of ‘professional’ has tended to emphasise a requirement for teachers to conform to the mandated expertise of authorities in terms of the purpose of compulsory schooling, curriculum content, teaching method, and reportable outcomes, as part of a political regime of accountability.

Currently fashionable methods of accountability damage rather than repair trust. If we want greater accountability without damaging professional performance we need *intelligent accountability….* Real accountability provides substantive and knowledgeable independent judgement of an institution’s or professional’s work. (O’Neill, O. 2002, pp. 37-8)

With particular reference to education, Biesta (2015, p. 9) claims

the blunt demand to work in an evidence-based way thus appears as an attempt to eradicate professional judgement with regard to the ‘how’ and the ‘what for’ of professional action from the domain of professionalism. It seeks to transform professions into abstract ‘machines’ in which reflection and judgement are seen as weaknesses rather than as an essential part. This shows how the call for an evidence-based approach is not a deepening of the knowledge and judgement of professionals, but rather an attempt to overrule such knowledge and judgement.

Scholarly investigation of ‘profession’ over the past century has produced a limited understanding of the notion. Investigation of trust relations in teaching may help advance understanding and facilitate effective intervention by those desiring to improve teaching in schools. Identification of how trust relations actually work in specific teaching situations can help understanding of what is significant and what is an acceptable standard in assessing what teachers do. This can be applied to enable teachers to be more efficient and effective. Of more direct interest to PESA members, is that understanding these relations may help advance the normative arguments about what good teaching is to promote good education. The contested judgments about these matters establish what should be measured and reported in accounts of professional work and what counts as efficiency and effectiveness.

This paper is part of a project to explore the possibility that philosophical attention to the relational notion of ‘trust’ rather than a notion of ‘absolute truth’ may help advance understanding of justifications of how we live and the judgements we make, beyond reference to such things as warranted assertability, meaning as use, and rule following. While recognizing that some see trust as a moral notion, this paper is based on a view that trust relations are wider than interpersonal relations. Interpersonal relations, particularly moral relations, have the potential to be reciprocal and have features not found in trust relations between people and propositions and between people and the inanimate world. Those additional features may be cited to justify the view that trust is a peculiarly moral notion whereas other relations are merely reliance of one form or another. Trust is more than reliance, because one may rely (of necessity) but not trust something, but that does not make trust a moral notion.

**Profession**

A profession is a tradition encompassing numerous more specific traditions that may be seen to either share some common traits that may or may not be sufficient to provide a robust set of defining characteristics, or they may demonstrate family resemblances without traits common to all. Bourke, Lidstone and Ryan (2015, p.84) surveyed past attempts to define ‘professionalism’ and reported that

Freidson (1994) concluded that the use of the term professionalism was inconsistent, Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) proclaimed that there was no universal agreement of the concept, Hanlon (1998) regarded it as a shifting rather than a concrete plan, Helsby (1995) observed that it was subject to geographical and cultural differences, and Holroyd (2000) conclude that it had changed its meaning throughout history.

At the very least, this consensus of opinion would tend to suggest that there is little prospect of any useful outcome from a project to identify the defining characteristics of ‘profession’ and deducing certain logical, uncontroversial consequences for the education of professional teachers or their teaching career in schools. For those who might cling to the hope that some elemental features would definitively identify professions, such as a profession requiring a lengthy period of university study plus experience within the practice, it may be disappointing to consider the example of a university with which I have been associated that has degree studies in surfing and beer brewing (two separate degrees, offered on different campuses). Perhaps not, as there is a professional surfing circuit and the practice of home brewing, but the resulting account of ‘profession’ may not meet the needs of those seeking to address the concerns regarding teachers as identified above.

Tapper and Millett (2015, pp. 12 - 13/16) offer a promising approach with their

tentative suggestion is that the formal element of a profession might be construed in terms of employing dangerous (or potent) knowledge in pursuit of a public good by people of good character who behave ethically in the use of that knowledge (with vulnerable clients). …. The formal element of a concept is the reason or reasons for its formation…. The point of the concept … is found not in the action (or thing) itself but in our needs as social beings…. it is the formal element of the concept that determines the material elements, which can be very variable.

Following Kovesi (1967) and Hanna and Harrison (2004), Tapper and Millett (2015, p. 16) attempt to identify the point of the concept in use in social practices to understand how the

concept operates to structure the practices of the professions … (and, in particular, to understand how) … to be a professional is to have obligations one would not otherwise have.

These obligations reflect the nature of the asymmetric relation between professional and client.

Whatever is taken to count as a ‘profession’ for the purposes of addressing those concerns about teachers, it may be possible to accept Fellenz’ (2015, pp. 3-4) suggestion

to consider those as professionals who responsibly and autonomously participate in a profession or—more descriptively—in the situated practices of a relevant professional community of practice, who have gained entry to their professions through recognised educational pathways, who share in the collective professional identity and the collective understanding of the specific institutionalised order enacted by the members of the relevant profession and who are subject to any normative elements of the self- or external regulation of professional practice.

**Professional teacher**

Unlike many of the exemplar professions, school teaching involves long-term cumulative work with a group to achieve growth in desirable qualities rather than short-term interventions with individuals to address specific undesirable qualities. So it should not be surprising that the requirements of a professional teacher should differ from those in the exemplar professions. More specific requirements for professional teachers’ reflection, judgement, and action are articulated by Carr and Skinner (2009, p.145)

professional maturity at least involves:

(i) coming to have a critical voice in the wider ‘conversation’ (in Oakeshott’s (1962) apt term) about the contribution of schools and other educational institutions to individual, social and cultural flourishing;

(ii) coming to appreciate and interpret local and particular educational

requirements in the light of such conversation;

(iii) acquiring the capacity for wise decision, deliberation and judgement in local conditions and circumstances; and

(iv) cultivating dispositions to act appropriately, flexibly and effectively on such decisions. In short, professional reflection cannot be merely a matter of obedience to external direction and must involve coming to think—albeit in an appropriately principled and responsible way—for oneself.

Even if these requirements are accepted as common sense, and more importantly when they are not, the question remains why should they be accepted? It will be a pretty thin and unconvincing answer to say “These requirements should be accepted because that is what it is to be a professional teacher”. Knowing what it is to be a professional teacher is not the same as knowing why teachers should be one.

To be a professional teacher is to see the world ‘as a teacher’, to accept being a teacher, to undertake the work of a teacher, to meet the obligations of a teacher, and be accepted by other participants in the tradition as a teacher. This is far more than possessing certain items of knowledge and particular skills. It is to craft what knowledge and skills one has together to form a coherent set of purposes, attitudes, values, expectations, and other social features, to live the life of a professional teacher with a style that is acceptable to other participants. Generally, it seems more fruitful to conceive of the professional teacher as a coherent set of relations (including trust relations) participating within particular traditions, rather than as an aggregation of specifiable knowledge and skills. Dall’Alba (2009 p. 36/7) captures some of this

if we make a commitment to become a teacher… what we seek to know, how we act, and who we are is directed by and to this commitment, which organizes and constitutes our becoming…. Becoming a professional … involves transformation of the self through embodying the routines and traditions of the profession…

The professional teacher lives a purposeful life trying to get things right or, as Fellenz, 2015 p. 2) puts it “do well *and* do good”, informed by the traditions in which the professional teacher participates. What counts as right and why, is bound up in the trust relations of the participants of the traditions involved.

**Trust**

Over the past 20 years, the mining industry has developed the concept of ‘a social licence to operate’ within a context of trust-based relations that complements legal, moral and contractual obligations. The concept of a social license to operate is a useful way to help understand aspects of schooling and the practice of a professional teacher. Walker, 1996, p. 90) put it this way

Both the legitimation and the legitimacy of autonomy and authority, implied by the professional licences to practise issued by universities and remaining in force until revoked for malpractice, depend minimally on public tolerance, but desirably on public support. The licence to practice should mean more than the imprimatur by peers of the competence to practice, politically and ethically it should mean the witting respect of the community (as contrasted with market demand under monopoly conditions) for professional services an professional education.

A focus on the trust-based relations in school can provide an understanding of the requirements for the successful practice of a professional teacher. Instead of a focus on the personal characteristics of the professional teacher, trust-based relations help identify the significant participants in the practice and what they require to justify their acceptance, support and/or engagement in the practice. In the school setting,

The nature of the particular social licence to operate, in its context of trust-based relations, provide criteria for curriculum content selection, teaching methods, and standards for assessment. (Haynes, 2015, p. 1)

It is a commonplace that one of the requirements for successful teaching is confidence. A professional teacher’s confidence is justified if they have evidence that other participants in the practice trust the teacher to ‘do well and do good’ as they expect. Identifying what students, school and system administration, parents, politicians, and the general public require in order to place their trust in the professional teacher enables sound judgement to be made about what constitutes “doing well and doing good”. For the professional teacher to identify what it would take for them to trust these other participants helps complete the picture.

Identifying the features of these trust relations is likely to be a more complex task than mapping general trust relations in most moral situations. In general, trust as a moral notion assumes equality of participants with respect to relevant criteria. Trust is not only a moral notion and trust is important in other than moral situations. So, while there are moral notions of trust inherent in the practice of the professional teacher, including such things as disinterested beneficence, the non-moral trust in the technical competence of the professional teacher to motivate a class to engage with the lesson at hand is also an important trust relation. Administrator’s trust in the zeal and industry of the professional teacher and the teacher’s trust in the diligence of the students are likewise important trust relations.

While Tapper and Millett take trust to be a moral notion, they point to the significance of the obligations created by the concept of the professional teacher and to the distinctive asymmetry between the obligations of professional and client. It is, of course, at matter of contention whether the metaphor of ‘profession’ usefully extends as far as designating a school child as a ‘client’. However there is a discernable asymmetry between the professional teacher and the student (and other participants in the practice) that has importance for the trust relations between them. It is common to assume that the professional teacher possesses curriculum knowledge that the student does not and that this creates power and obligations that would not otherwise exist. It is also the case that the student possesses curriculum knowledge and this too creates power and obligations that would not otherwise exist. The student has some knowledge of the curriculum content but also has a particular way of using new information provided by the teacher to modify their curriculum knowledge. The student also has an attitude towards the curriculum knowledge being presented by the teacher and this helps shape the relation between student and teacher. An account of the trust relations between professional teacher and student regarding curriculum knowledge would need to be sensitive to the reciprocal nature of those relations. I – Thou is not a one way street.

Risk is also distributed asymmetrically among participants in the practice and how that is conceived in the case of the client, patient, or student is likely to be different. But how risk is understood in the work of the professional teacher is likely to be informed by a better understanding of the trust relations in place in actual situations. So attention to the trust relations in a generalized account of the work of professional teachers is capable of generating a useful theoretical account of the practice. It is possible to give a general account of the risk faced by a hypothetical professional teacher in a hypothetical school, class, administration, parents, and students. The risk of poor or mediocre teaching is very different for the professional teacher, for the class as a whole, for the student who has home support to compensate for the limitations of the school, or for the weak student who struggles to understand. Attention to the actual trust relations in particular workplaces is likely to empower participants to make better judgements about how to ‘do well and do good’. Trust, like happiness, is not a goal to be pursued but rather a desirable outcome of doing what is right.

**Trust and the professional teacher**

Authorities can, and do, draw up lists of required standards, teacher knowledge and skills and assert that to comply with those authoritative lists is for a professional teacher to “get things right”. Such lists tend to suffer at least two main defects. Not even the most loudly proclaimed evidence-based lists seem to be backed by evidence that should be accepted as convincing or argument that is justifiable. Second, such lists tend to be general and incomplete, so being of limited application to particular circumstances. The lists do have a major function that is now seen to be more important, viz., political control of schooling. After a brief flirtation with professional autonomy in schools with associated claims that improved outcomes would result, politicians in Australia and elsewhere have persuaded the electorate that professional autonomy and increased expenditure have not produced outcomes the politicians require. It is widely accepted that trust in professional expertise by politicians and the public has declined in the past 30 years and this is reflected in their expectations of professional teachers.

At the policy level, reports based on professional expertise are now much less likely to be commissioned or attended to by politicians in Australia than was the case for 40 years after the Second World War. The tendency is now to produce a paper in support of or elaborating a politically predetermined policy outcome. Support for research is now more on ‘what works’, as politically defined, rather than on what professional researchers take to be worthwhile. These are indicators that professional expertise at the highest levels is not so well regarded as once it was. Policy judgements about schooling can now be made quite satisfactorily without the inconvenient input from experts who are not trusted to share or acquiesce to political views.

In England, after an experiment with teacher education, teacher training is now back in favour but with far more compliance requirements than ever before.

There are national ‘skills tests’ in addition to the ITT (initial teacher training) programme in England, which may be seen as demonstrating a lack of trust in providers’ ability to ensure that the programmes themselves can guarantee the development of these skills in all trainees. (Menter, Brisard, and Smith. 2006, p. 279)

The life of the professional teacher in Australia at present is significantly shaped by the operation of State-based registration bodies, including codes of conduct and professional standards for teachers. These standards may be applied to limit what further study a teacher may do at university or what forms of inservice professional development they may take. At the national level there is the mandated national curriculum together with mandatory testing (eg NAPLAN) and reporting on a limited range of curriculum content. National professional standards for teachers, and the requirement (enforced by funding and accreditation) that these are reflected in university preservice courses, are a further significant change in the life of the Australian professional teacher. These changes reflect a shifting set of trust relations and reinforce the establishment of a new set of trust relations that tend to serve political rather than professional interests. While there have always been significant trust relations between teachers and members of the community, including parents and students, that have placed limitations on what teachers may properly do in social settings, there seems to be a degree of greater caution now as a result of the imposition of mandated professional restrictions on teachers. The trust relations between teachers and the community have shifted and so set new standards of what may be done in public and why. Some of these standards are reminiscent of those common in the later nineteenth century when compulsory schooling was being established. The institutionalised level of trust in teachers seems to have lessened partly, perhaps, as a result of the imposition of measures ostensibly intended to underpin and increase public trust in teachers. However, this is often not reflected in less parental trust in their own children’s teachers.

Is the investigation of trust relations in an actual educational situation, by professional teachers and others, a form of philosophy of education? Hogan (2015, 379) claims that philosophy of education

is a distinct kind of *practical* philosophy….it is a self-critical form of enquiry into the deliberate promotion, and the justification, of fruitful learning in human experience. It is a form of enquiry that properly orients the self-understanding and actions of educational practitioners, including leaders and researchers, within the social and historical circumstances in which they are placed.

This account has its attractions and such an investigation of actual trust relations in the educational practice within which professional teachers work has the potential to overcome the unsustainable and competing views that education policy regarding compulsory schooling should be the domain of either professional teachers or politicians. Oscillations between empowering teachers and political domination of schooling are undesirable and unproductive. The shared participation in the determination of education policy, resource allocation, acceptable practice and standards in schooling can be revealed in investigations of trust relations. In that way the contribution of schooling to the development of educated citizens in a democratic society may be enhanced.

Olssen et. al. (2004, p. 197) argue that the restoration of a culture of trust and professional accountability within all educational institutions is a necessary prerequisite for the maintenance of a robust and prosperous democratic society. If this project of restoration is to be undertaken successfully it would seem necessary for increased recognition of the power of the study of trust relations to provide a more fruitful account of professional teaching. Such a study could produce a carefully nuanced and sensitive account of the relations between those engaged in the practice in which the professional teacher participates. This account could then be used to identify what would count as ‘doing it right’ with respect to the education of children in schools.

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