

# The Development of Teaching as a Profession: Comparison with Careers that have Achieved Full Professional Standing

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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June 2003



Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

In addition to our authors and reviewers, many individuals and organizations have contributed substantially to our efforts, including Drs. Erling Boe of the University of Pennsylvania and Elaine Carlson of WESTAT. We also have benefited greatly from collaboration with the National Clearinghouse for the Professions in Special Education, the Policymakers Partnership, and their parent organizations, the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, H325Q000002, is a cooperative agreement between the University of Florida and the Office of Special Education Programs of the U. S. Department of Education. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education, nor does mention of other organizations imply endorsement by them.

Recommended citation:

Connelly, V.J., & Rosenberg, M.S. (2003). *Developing teaching as a profession: Comparison with careers that have achieved full professional standing. (COPSSE Document Number RS-9E)*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.



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## INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates issues surrounding the status of teaching as a profession—what makes an occupation a profession and perspectives of professions in American society, examining a range of views. The developmental histories of four established professions—medicine, law, engineering, social work—are compared to the developmental status of general and special education teaching as a profession.

## WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

There is hardly a policy debate in the fields of general and special education that does not question whether teaching is a true profession or whether it is something less, such as a skilled occupation. Clearly, this issue is not new. According to Etzioni in the 1960s, teaching had neither established nor desired the status of medicine and law and could best be thought of as a *semi-profession*. In his view, teaching had a smaller body of knowledge and less functional autonomy from supervision or external control. Consequently, teaching was nothing more than an occupation in need of supervision and not an autonomous profession. Researchers in the 1980s acknowledged that special education was a semi-profession that could move toward full professional standing if there were: (a) formulation of professional standards and (b) identification and development of a common body of practice in which all teachers are trained.

In response, a number of teachers, teacher educators, organizations, and policy makers took up the charge and attempted to prove teaching worthy of the term *professional*, asking:

- Where do educators in general and special educators in particular stand on the professionalism continuum?
- Are educators stalled at the stage of skilled occupation or semi-profession, or is the field still moving toward full professional standing?
- How do critical events, policy initiatives, and policies experienced in the developmental trajectory of education compare to fields with full professional standing?

Six characteristics traditionally elevate a profession from an occupation:

1. Professions are distinguished by the degree and complexity of the knowledge required for the work needed to be done.
2. Professional work requires a lengthy period of induction.
3. Development and growth of a professional's skill and knowledge base is expected through the career of a professional.
4. Professionals are persons who specialize and hold expertise in their field of practice.
5. Professions and professional employees have substantial authority over their actions.
6. Professionals receive relatively high salaries and enjoy better compensation for their work compared to other occupations.

Much debate has centered on the extent to which professions either serve as agents of privilege (i.e., limiting access to and monopolizing service) or as agents of democracy (i.e., permitting vertical mobility and basing authority on knowledge and skill). The view of the professional as a self-interested elitist contrasts with the view of the professional as a disinterested specialist, an expert necessarily qualified to perform the work at hand. Our culture expects that those who provide our most critical public services be knowledgeable and skillful specialists seeking excellence and quality in their work. Accordingly, if educators generally, and special educators in particular, are to conform to the ideal of a professional as a specialist, they should be expected to be competent, knowledgeable, and effective to be afforded the public trust and prestige associated with the word *professional*.

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## THE DEVELOPMENTAL COURSE OF ESTABLISHED PROFESSIONS

The majority of individuals in the professions reviewed have attained a knowledge base and credentials, earned the public trust, and achieved a level of status, authority, and independence. Social work was chosen as a comparative profession because of characteristics shared with teaching. Specifically, social work is currently engaged in an internal debate over its status as a profession. Further, social work and teaching (unlike the professions of medicine, law, and engineering) exist primarily to serve in a public welfare function that is, in part, funded and directed by the state.

### **Medicine: The Fall and Rise of the Profession**

*History.* The history of the medical profession in America in the 19th and 20th centuries provides interesting analogies to current debates in the professional status of teaching. The opening of the first medical college in Philadelphia in 1765 enabled doctors to supplement apprenticeships, the primary mode of learning then, with formal lectures and medical degrees. By 1830, there were 22 such medical institutions in the U. S. The fall of American medicine occurred in three areas. First, revised state laws in the 1830s accepted a medical school diploma as the equivalent of a license to practice medicine, creating a large number of for-profit medical schools. The second element was the fragmentation of its body of knowledge and skills as medical practitioners splintered into competing sects espousing alternative therapies. The third element was the field's inability to exert control over the supply of medical practitioners crowding the field. In 1846, the State Medical Society of New York convened a national convention to address concerns in medical education and practice and the next year this group formed the American Medical Association (AMA), the first national society of physicians. Reforms instituted by the AMA included: (a) the establishment of a code of ethics, (b) the establishment of minimum patient fees to be binding in all cases except for the indigent, (c) exclusion from AMA membership practices based on exclusive dogma, and (d) establishment of standards for AMA-approved medical schools.

In 1893, the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine established a bachelors degree as a requirement for admission, setting the standard for other schools. Shortly after, states established licensing boards that required all candidates to hold an undergraduate diploma for admission to medical school and medical graduates to pass a qualifying examination. In 1904, the AMA created the Council on Medical Education, which inspected and graded medical schools. The Flexner Report on medical education in the U. S. forced many institutions to shut down and halted production of unqualified and under-qualified physicians. This professional winnowing, combined with the growth of health insurance, helped physicians surpass bankers and lawyers as the highest paid workers in the land.

The quality of the practice of medicine in the past suffered from three major deficits within the emergent profession: (a) legitimate programs of preparation were difficult to separate from the shoddy and entrepreneurial, (b) there were no clear demarcations separating qualified and unqualified candidates, and (c) fads and competing alternative therapies were allowed to co-exist with those that were grounded in scientific fact, theory, and research. In response to these deficits, the profession, guided by the force of the newly founded AMA, began to exercise central professional control over admissions to education programs, accreditation of schools, and the content of their preparation programs.

*Comparisons to education.* Teacher education currently faces a debate over the appropriateness and proliferation of the for-profit professional preparation model. Business-minded, for-profit corporations engaged in the delivery of undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs have experienced rapid growth. There are few demarcations today separating qualified from unqualified teacher candidates. Considerable research has shown that many new teachers are entering the field without adequate preparation for their positions. The field of education has found that determining what constitutes acceptable teacher quality can be a very problematic issue; each state defines a licensed teacher quite differently. The field of teacher preparation is

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also in disagreement about what constitutes a quality program. Mid-career entrants from other fields have been enticed into the field of teaching through a variety of programs of varying quality. There are great debates over the knowledge base—what teachers should know and do regarding instruction in the classroom. To add to the complexity, for example, general and special education differ in the content that must be mastered, pedagogy, knowledge of students with disabilities, and contexts in which teachers work.

### **Law: The Tug of War between the Profession and the Public**

*History.* The profession of law has also had to resolve divisive issues concerning how practitioners are to be prepared. Should lawyers and the institutions that prepare them be deregulated and opened to unrestricted competition, or should they be controlled through some external (or state-controlled) regulatory agency? The evolution of the preparation and accreditation of lawyers is a good example of how a shared responsibility between state and professional agencies has developed in an effort to reduce tension between the powers of the profession and the public it serves.

The early status of law as a profession in America was characterized by the post-revolutionary rise of "gentlemen of the bar." By 1820, an open-door policy of professional legal recruitment was adopted. Success in the court, rather than prior certification, was key to establishing one's self as a successful attorney. Law schools established prior to the 1830s, usually affiliated with colleges or universities, looked at law as a humanistic discipline requiring many years of study. Most law students preferred to dispense with this unnecessary learning and get on with the business of fee collection. Some in the field of law attempted to establish moral standards in addition to professional norms, while others saw the unsettling effects of the Industrial Revolution as an opportunity to gain enhanced prestige. More lay people turned to experts for guidance, making the late 19th century a seed time for professional development in the U. S. In 1878, the American Bar Association (ABA) was formed and became a powerful lobbying force. States adopted the closed-shop policy of an integrated, compulsory membership in a state bar for the practicing lawyer.

The law profession struggled in its early attempts to find a unitary system of legal education. After adoption of the case method of instruction and a scientific rigor, the sole focus of legal preparation became law school and the quality of the school's program. Night and part-time programs education of lawyers maintained open access to the profession. The ABA in 1921 gave its Council on Legal Education central authority to give accreditation only to schools that adopted uniform educational standards. States insisted that law school training was the sole method of preparation for the bar, and students could only attend schools approved by the ABA or American Association of Law Schools (AALS) through the Council on Legal Education. The result was an increase in the breadth and quality of both full- and part-time programs of preparation.

The need to protect the public from ill-prepared attorneys necessitated state participation in the licensing process. The state exercises its control over the quality and quantity of lawyers through the bar exam. Neither the bar exam nor the state licensing agency prescribe a preparatory curriculum. This is the domain of the law school, whose curriculum is expected to meet the educational standards set by the profession.

*Comparisons to education.* Education is still debating the qualifications and competencies a teacher must have before entering a classroom. By sharing responsibility for induction into the legal profession, the state ensures a minimum level of competence through the exam, while the law school retains its autonomy and prestige through the quality of the education that it provides its student. States do not unilaterally dictate the content of the law schools curriculum, but rely on the content of their qualifying exam.

Which is considered of more value in education—the state teaching certificate or the diploma from a school of education? Teachers are clearly more concerned with the importance of maintaining certification than evaluating the status and quality of the degree that institution provides. But until

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law schools established the legal case method, programs of law eliminated all subjects not immediately useful to practitioners, students were permitted to come and go as they pleased (provided they paid their fees), and examinations were abolished. Under these conditions, understandably, the law school prospered and enjoyed high enrollment, but at what price success? The lessons for education are clear.

### **Engineering: Public Versus Private Professional Interests**

*History.* From the outset, engineering as an American profession was solidly connected to national goals. By the 1830s, the tasks of engineers were clearly defined: they were to create prosperity for the citizenry, and, through that abundance, demonstrate the wisdom of the country's political system. The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia was first to train the engineer as a scientist instead of an artisan. In the late 19th century, engineering teamed with the emerging economic industrial movement, and the benefits of scientific technical analysis in engineering were turned to benefit industry. As a result of this convergence, the first American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME), founded in 1880, had a remarkable coherent sense of mission about their work. In the early 20th century, a group sought to split from engineering, perceived to be driven by private, selfish, and corrupt motives, toward a new city manager or independent, contractual level of public service. This movement raised the question of the role of a professional engineering society in America.

The revolt of the engineer and growth in the number of engineers split engineers into factions, by geography and by specialty. The present ideal of engineering professionalism as specialized occupational independence emerged from this split—a pure professional-client relationship where the engineer serves a client in a manner that is unbiased by special interests. The engineer now operated with the professional freedom achieved when specialized knowledge is applied to socially important goals.

*Comparisons to education.* Two factors are similar in teaching and engineering. First, a focus on work toward the best interests of the public is clear in education and through the public works focus in engineering. Second, the two professions both debate the evolving nature and purposes of their professions. Specifically, engineering has been influenced greatly by the introduction of a market approach. Teaching is beginning to confront a similar influence, debating how educational services should be delivered in the presence of current market forces. It can be argued that there is a fundamental paradox between the nature of a teacher's work, which is essentially democratic and for the public good, and market-driven reform, which is competitive and individualistic.

In summary, we have considered the evolution of engineering as a profession and the development of a contractual model in which engineers offer their expertise through a marketed client-professional relationship. The lessons here may be prophetic for education. Teaching and teacher education will inevitably take stands on a spectrum of issues ranging from market-led to government-directed. Whether teachers will be perceived as domesticated government workers or as independent professionals in the future remains a critical issue for the profession. The extent to which teaching is willing/unwilling to conform to external forces—governmental or free-market forces—will inevitably change the character of the education system and its influences on American society at large.

### **Social Work: Two Traditions of Struggle**

*History.* The origins of social work can be traced back to two traditions of progressive activism: the Charities Organization Societies (COS) and the Settlement Houses Movement (SHM). The COS focused on changing individuals; the SHM wanted systematic societal reform to drive the work of the field. The history of social work parallels cyclical expansions and contractions of these two traditions. In some periods, the field sought to meet individual needs and constructed itself around a clinical model. At other times, the field attempted comprehensive, sometimes radical, national societal change. By the early 1970s, the nationally unifying body of social work,

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the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), had rejected a long-standing separation between professional and political activities.

Three factors continue to help or hinder social work's attempts to define the profession and to shape its professional mission: (a) social work's structural location, (b) the requisites of professionalization in a market economy, and (c) changing political climates over the past 100 years. Social work is located somewhere between individuals and the system. It is forced to respond to the needs of individuals and their requirements in the context of a larger market economy. A market economy requires and encourages increased profitability from employers, something that essentially undercuts the breadth of social work's ameliorative agenda for individuals and communities. This contradiction is lessened during prosperous or liberal times, when all in the society benefit from the economy. The contradiction is heightened, however, during times of economic decline or conservative reaction, when the ability of social work to reconcile corporate profit and social well-being simultaneously is stretched to its limits.

Professionalization of social work required the development of an identifiable knowledge base, control of the social services market, creation of a commodity that would appeal to a large number of customers, and the acquisition of private donor support. In the context of a market economy, these requirements pressed social work to narrow its vision in the pursuit of professional status. The movement of social work's mission from advocating societal reform to rendering technical services efficiently—from a cause to a function—is the essence of its professional conundrum. A case work model eventually dominated the field. Social work restricted its practice to those holding an MSW degree. Social case workers from then on continued to refuse requests from group workers and community organizers for admittance into the field, further consolidating the move from its historical roots in charity to its modern appearance as an enterprise.

*Comparisons to education.* Similar to social work, teaching struggles with an unclear, bifurcated definition of its professional mission, which is split between cause and function. Like social work, teaching continues to be influenced in its mission by its structural location between individuals and the system, the requisites of professionalization in a market economy, and the effects of a changing political scene during the past 100 years. The most recent challenge to the mission of the teaching profession can be seen in the political climate and requirements contained in the revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), better known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which poses enormous challenges for teaching. The accountability measures in NCLB are forcing teaching's hand to declare itself as an entity in a market economy, one that must render its technical educational services more efficiently or be forced to abdicate its role in social welfare entirely, like social work.

## **IS TEACHING A PROFESSION?**

In its present stage of development and based on current comparisons with the professions reviewed, the authors concluded with those in previous decades that teaching is not quite a profession. However, is teaching on a developmental trajectory toward becoming a profession? The debate surrounding this question: (a) shares characteristics with earlier debates in the development of medicine, law, and engineering, (b) reflects part of a larger national schism—the love-hate relationship with the professional as either elitist or expert, and (c) includes locus-of-control issues, with control of the profession ranging from free-market forces at one extreme to total governmental control at the other extreme.

The paper reviews the implications of a two-dimensional representation of the pressures that serve either to promote or to diminish efforts to professionalize a vocation—minimalist/elitist versus free market/governmental control. The four quadrants are models for synthesizing major elements of debate toward understanding events, policies, and actions in the evolution of teaching as a profession.

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Another analysis characterizes the debate as two overarching national agendas: (a) professionalization of teaching and teacher education and (b) deregulation of teaching and teacher preparation. Three types of warrants in this model—evidentiary, accountability, and political—have been used to substantiate, justify, and legitimize positions on both sides of the debate. In terms of teaching, the professionalization side of the debate is characterized as favoring regulatory strategies to protect existing academic monopolies and move teacher preparation from a minimalist to an elitist, specialized position; the deregulation side is seen as favoring status quo policies to protect the advantaged, deny educational opportunities to the disadvantaged, and move toward teaching policies that represent minimalist, market-directed policies.

The authors of this paper conclude that the developmental trajectory of teaching is at a critical juncture and that the field is experiencing pressures on two major fronts. Responses to these pressures and the course that is pursued will determine if teaching is to remain a domesticated occupation or if it is to emerge as an independent profession of its own accord. The first pressure involves the methods used to determine who is and is not qualified to teach.

The second pressure affecting the developmental course of teaching involves: (a) scrutiny and rigor a profession devotes to educating and training professionals before issuing credentials and (b) professional identification of itself as either a public, government-directed enterprise or as a private market-directed enterprise.

## CONCLUSIONS

The authors believe that resolving professionalism issues in light of historical precedent will go a long way to help the status of teaching as a profession. Specifically, the following questions need to be resolved:

- Who should control licensing of teachers?
- Should licensing decisions primarily be based on a competency exam or completion of an approved program, or both?
- What are the effective elements of a course of study, and who should dictate them?
- How specific should a license to practice be?

In addition, the field must resolve these critical issues if teaching and teacher education is to move beyond classification as an occupation and be fully considered a profession:

- What is the value of professional preparation in teacher education? Is anyone qualified to teach, or is teaching worthy of professional preparation on a par with medicine, law, engineering, and social work?
- What is the suitability of a market-driven aspect to teaching and teacher education? As we have seen in medicine and law, sometimes ability to pay takes precedence over all other concerns when it comes to personnel preparation with disastrous results.
- What is the role of government in the preparation and assessment of teaching professionals, or, who should hold the keys to the gates of the profession? Should government prescribe a preparatory curriculum and teacher competency testing, or should a shared model of responsibility, (e.g., in law) prevail?
- What monitors and controls does teaching and teacher education have over the supply and demand of personnel?

The authors conclude that it is essential for teaching to take decisive action on these issues. The consequence of failing to address these issues is that others will define the field according to political and economic criteria rather than the educational knowledge base.